

Walk into almost any Los Angeles kitchen remodel consultation and the first questions are usually about style and color. Shaker or slab. White or walnut. Very few homeowners start with the question that quietly decides how long those cabinets will last in real L.A. Conditions: how thick is the cabinet material, and what is it made of?

I have opened up plenty of failed kitchens in Los Angeles, from Venice bungalows near the salt air to Hollywood Hills homes baked by afternoon sun. The patterns repeat. Sagging shelves from undersized panels. Swollen MDF near the sink. Drawer boxes that loosen after a few years because the sides were shaved too thin to save a few dollars.

If you are investing in custom cabinets, thickness and material choice are where durability really lives. The finish and style sit on top of that structure. So let's walk through what thicknesses actually work, how they affect cost, and how to talk about all this with a cabinet maker in Los Angeles.

First, what exactly does a cabinet maker do?

Most people lump carpenters and cabinet makers together, but in the trades they are not the same job.

A carpenter usually focuses on structural work and rough or finish carpentry: framing walls, installing doors and trim, building decks, setting windows. A cabinet maker is a specialist in boxes, doors, drawers, and fine casework. Where a carpenter thinks in walls and roofs, a cabinet maker thinks in millimeters, reveals, and joinery.

So what is a cabinet maker in practice?

A good custom cabinet maker will:

- Design, engineer, build, and often install kitchen, bath, and built-in cabinetry tailored to a specific space, using materials and thicknesses that fit your budget and goals.

That one line hides a lot of work. They measure, create shop drawings, choose appropriate materials for boxes, doors, drawers, and face frames, run everything through saws and CNC equipment, assemble in the shop, finish the pieces, then bring them to the job site for installation. Many also build bathroom vanities, laundry room cabinets, media units, and sometimes freestanding furniture when it relates to the same project.

Some installers are carpenters by background, some are cabinet makers, but for custom work in Los Angeles, most shops provide both fabrication and installation as a package.

Why material thickness matters so much in L.A. Kitchens

Los Angeles gives cabinets three main kinds of abuse:

Sun, moisture, and movement.

Kitchens here often sit under big windows or skylights. UV light breaks down finishes and heats up doors and panels. Coastal neighborhoods have moist, salty air. Anywhere in the city, dishwashers vent steam into adjacent drawers, and sinks leak a little over time. On top of that, L.A. Homes shift. Older houses, in particular, move a bit with seismic activity and seasonal changes.

When panels are too thin or the wrong material, you see:

- Shelves that bow under dishes and pantry items.
- Side panels that rack out of square.

- Door hinges that pull loose because the screws have too little material to bite.
- Toe kicks that crumble or delaminate when mopped water seeps in.
- Face frames that twist slightly, so doors never line up quite right again.

Thicker and stronger material resists those forces. It costs more, but it buys you a stiffer box, straighter doors, and hardware that stays tight for decades instead of years.

Core question: how thick should custom cabinet wood be?

When someone asks how thick custom cabinet wood should be, they often expect one simple number. There is no single right answer. Different parts of a cabinet should be different thicknesses.

Here is how most high quality shops in Los Angeles design their cabinets for durability.

Cabinet boxes: sides, tops, bottoms, and decks

For a hardworking kitchen, I almost never recommend going below 3/4 inch (19 mm) for your main box panels, especially in frameless cabinets. Thin 1/2 inch sides might technically work for light upper cabinets, but the long term trade-off is more racking and fasteners that can strip out more easily.

Frameless construction depends on the thickness of those sides. The hinge screws, drawer slides, and assembly screws all rely directly on that panel. A 3/4 inch plywood or high quality furniture board panel holds hardware better and resists sagging, which is why it is the standard in better European-style frameless systems.

In framed cabinets, you sometimes see 1/2 inch or 5/8 inch box material because the face frame adds rigidity. Even there, I prefer 5/8 or 3/4 inch on base cabinets, especially for long runs that carry stone countertops. A stone slab can weigh several hundred pounds; you want real structure beneath it, not a thin shell.

Backs: where shops often cut corners

Cabinet backs are where bid numbers get massaged, because many homeowners never think to ask. You will see everything from 1/8 inch hardboard to full 3/4 inch plywood.

For a permanent kitchen in Los Angeles, a 1/4 inch back stapled into a thin groove is the bare minimum, and I only tolerate that if the cabinet is also securely screwed into solid wall studs. Personally, I prefer 1/2 inch backs on large pantry cabinets and anywhere tall, heavy doors are hanging. This keeps the box square and makes installation more secure, since the installer can screw through a thick back panel anywhere, not just at small hanging rails.

Shelves: where sag shows first

Shelves are unforgiving. Load them up with plates, pantry goods, or cookware, and the physics becomes obvious within a year.



Bradco Kitchens

5350 Venice Blvd. 1st Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90019
323 310-4049
<https://bradcokitchen.com/>

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For typical kitchen spans in the 24 to 36 inch range:

- 3/4 inch plywood or high density particleboard does well, especially with edge banding.
- 5/8 inch can be acceptable for shorter spans or glassware.
- 1/2 inch is asking for visible deflection unless the span is very short or reinforced.

If you like deep pantry shelves or heavy stoneware, you might ask your cabinet maker to double up the front edge or use a thicker material there. In taller pantries, I often design a thicker fixed middle shelf that helps stiffen the entire cabinet.

Doors and drawer fronts

Door thickness affects both feel and stability. In most custom work, 3/4 inch door thickness is standard and works well with common hinge systems. Thin 5/8 inch doors feel light and can warp more easily, especially in larger sizes exposed to sunlight. 1 inch doors look substantial and resist warping, but they are heavier and need the right hinges.

For slab doors in high sun L.A. Kitchens, I prefer 3/4 inch or thicker in a very stable material like high quality MDF with veneer or a well selected rift-sawn hardwood. Wide rail and stile doors should also be engineered carefully to avoid seasonal movement telegraphing through the finish.

Drawer fronts typically match the door thickness. Consistency in thickness helps keep reveals tight and makes the whole room feel more precise.

Drawer boxes: daily abuse champions

Drawer boxes do more work than any other part of your kitchen. You pull them in and out dozens of times a day. They carry pots, pans, utensils, and sometimes overloaded junk.

The gold standard in custom drawers is 1/2 inch to 5/8 inch solid hardwood sides with a 1/4 inch or 3/8 inch plywood bottom set in a groove. For heavy duty drawers, I prefer 5/8 inch sides and at least a 3/8 inch bottom, firmly glued and captured on all four sides.

Undermount soft-close slides, which most Los Angeles clients want, rely on precise drawer box dimensions. Thicker, well machined drawer sides keep those tolerances and hold mounting screws better over time.

Material choice: plywood, MDF, or particleboard?

Thickness is only half the story. The question "How thick should custom cabinet wood be?" Assumes you are using real wood. In reality, most cabinets are a combination of solid wood, plywood, MDF, and sometimes furniture grade particleboard.

The usual conversation goes straight to this: are plywood cabinets better than MDF?

The answer depends on where in the cabinet you are.

For cabinet boxes in an L.A. Kitchen, especially near sinks and dishwashers, a good grade of plywood is almost always the safer choice. It handles incidental moisture better and holds screws more reliably. Not all plywood is equal, though. You want cabinet grade panels with enough plies and a flat surface, not construction sheathing.

MDF shines on painted doors and detailed profiles because it machines smoothly and does not have grain that telegraphs through the finish. For slab painted doors, MDF is often the best material, as long as the edges are properly sealed. In box construction, full MDF cabinets are more vulnerable to swelling if water gets past the finish.

High density particleboard or furniture board still shows up in many European frameless systems. The better grades are surprisingly stable and flat, though less tolerant of water damage. If your cabinet maker uses particleboard boxes, thickness should never drop below 3/4 inch, and any sink cabinet should be very well protected or built from plywood instead.

Framed vs frameless: how it changes thickness decisions

When people ask whether framed or frameless cabinets are better, we are really talking about two different engineering approaches.

Framed cabinets have a solid face frame attached to the front of the box. That frame adds strength and gives hinges and doors a more forgiving mounting surface. Because of that frame, some shops feel comfortable using 1/2 inch or 5/8 inch box material.

Frameless cabinets skip the face frame. Doors mount directly to the sides, and drawer boxes slide between them. This gives you more storage space and a clean, modern look, which many Los Angeles homeowners prefer. But structurally, it relies heavily on thicker, stronger box panels. In frameless construction, 3/4 inch sides and partitions are not optional if you want long term durability.

So if you want sleek, contemporary, frameless European style cabinets, make sure your cabinet maker is not shaving thickness to hit a price point. That is where regret usually starts.

What is the best wood for custom cabinets in Los Angeles?

When clients ask what material is best for kitchen cabinets, I ask three questions:

How do you cook, what is your budget, and what look are you after?

For stained or natural wood looks, rift-sawn white oak, walnut, and maple are common choices in L.A. High end kitchens. For painted cabinets, maple frames with MDF panels or full MDF doors under a quality finish work very well.

For the actual box structure:

Plywood is usually the best material for custom cabinets when balancing strength, cost, and durability. A cabinet maker might build boxes from prefinished birch plywood, then use hardwoods and MDF where appearance matters more.

If a shop wants to build the whole cabinet from solid wood, you are in rarefied, very expensive territory. That is closer to furniture and can be stunning, but it is not always the most stable choice for large modern kitchens.

How thickness and material affect cost in Los Angeles

The question "How much should I pay for custom cabinets?" Or "How much do custom kitchen cabinets cost in Los Angeles?" Never has a simple flat number. For a full L.A. Kitchen, you will often see ranges like 25,000 to 80,000 dollars for custom cabinetry alone, sometimes higher in luxury projects.

Material thickness and quality are a big part of what pushes a project up or down that range.

Thicker plywood boxes, high grade hinges and slides, and properly built drawers cost more in materials and labor. A shop that uses 3/4 inch prefinished plywood throughout and solid hardwood dovetailed drawer boxes must charge more than someone building from thinner, cheaper stock.

If you find a quote that is dramatically cheaper than others, ask for a detailed breakdown. What thickness are the boxes, shelves, and backs. What kind of material is used at the sink. Are drawer boxes 1/2 inch hardwood or thin particleboard. How thick are the doors. Cheap bids usually hide smaller numbers in these details.

For very rough ranges in Los Angeles:

- Semi-custom cabinets might land between 15,000 and 35,000 dollars for a typical kitchen.
- True custom cabinets often run between 25,000 and 80,000 dollars, depending on size, material, and detail.

High end projects with specialty veneers, exotic woods, or fully custom finishes can push well into six figures. Those are the most expensive kitchen cabinets you see in magazines and luxury new builds.

Are custom cabinets worth the money?

Custom cabinets cost more because you are paying for tailored design, stronger construction, better materials, and more careful installation. The markup on custom cabinets compared with raw material cost can look large on paper, but it absorbs design time, shop equipment, skilled labor, finishing, insurance, and overhead in an expensive city.

Whether custom cabinets are worth the money depends on how long you plan to stay and how important your kitchen is to daily life. In many Los Angeles neighborhoods, high quality cabinetry is almost expected at resale. A well designed custom kitchen often makes a home easier to sell and can justify a higher price, especially in mid to high tier markets.

As a rule of thumb, quality custom cabinets with thoughtful design, good materials, and adequate thickness are a good investment in a home you plan to live in for at least seven to ten years. Cheap, thin cabinets are rarely a bargain once you factor in frustration, repairs, and earlier replacement.

Custom vs semi-custom vs stock: where thickness fits in

Homeowners often ask:

What is the difference between custom and semi-custom cabinets, and are custom cabinets better than stock cabinets?

Stock cabinets come in fixed sizes and limited styles, built in volume. Semi-custom adds more sizing options and door styles but usually still uses a factory line. Custom cabinets are built to your exact space and [Kitchen Remodeling Los Angeles](#) needs, usually at a smaller or mid sized shop.

From a thickness standpoint, stock and lower priced semi-custom lines are where you most often encounter thinner materials: 1/2 inch box sides, minimal backs, and basic drawer boxes. Higher end semi-custom lines sometimes upgrade to 5/8 or 3/4 inch boxes with better hardware.

Custom shops vary. Some build at a level comparable to good semi-custom lines and focus mainly on flexibility of size and layout. Better custom shops in Los Angeles use thickness and joinery well above standard stock cabinets, not just custom sizes.

Whether it is cheaper to buy cabinets or have them made depends heavily on which stock line you are comparing to which custom shop and what materials each uses. For a small kitchen, a decent semi-custom line may be cheaper than custom. For a tricky space with many fillers and modifications, a clean custom layout sometimes ends up closer in price than people expect.

Remodeling, refacing, or replacing in L.A.

If you already have cabinets, you might consider remodeling instead of full replacement. Homeowners ask:

Is it cheaper to refinish or replace kitchen cabinets, and is cabinet refacing worth it?

Refinishing uses your existing doors and boxes, stripping or sanding and then painting or staining. It is the cheapest way to refresh the look, but it does not fix structural issues like thin, sagging shelves or weak drawer boxes.

Refacing keeps your boxes but replaces doors and drawer fronts, sometimes adding new veneer to the face frames. It costs more than simple refinishing, but less than full replacement. In Los Angeles, refacing an average kitchen can range from 10,000 to 30,000 dollars, depending on materials and the number of doors and drawers.

Refacing is worth it when the underlying boxes are structurally sound, reasonably thick, and laid out well. If your existing cabinets were built with thin, poor quality material, putting beautiful new doors on them is like putting race tires on a car with a cracked frame.

In many older L.A. Homes, I open up the toe kicks or remove a shelf and see 3/8 or 1/2 inch particleboard failing in hidden spots. In those cases, full replacement with new boxes built to proper thickness is often the smarter long term move.

Timelines: how long does it take to build and install custom cabinets?

Custom cabinets are not fast. How long it takes to make custom cabinets in Los Angeles depends on the shop's workload and complexity, but eight to twelve weeks from final approval to delivery is common. In busy seasons it can stretch longer.

Installation of a full custom kitchen usually takes one to two weeks on site, sometimes longer if you have integrated appliances, floating shelves, or tight coordination with countertop templates and tile. A simple, straightforward layout in new construction goes faster than a remodel in a crooked 1920s bungalow.

If your cabinet maker also does countertops, the schedule can be smoother because one team coordinates all the templating and fitting. Otherwise, make sure your cabinet installer and countertop fabricator communicate clearly. The thickness of your cabinet boxes matters here too, since it affects how level and stable your counters will be.

Permits and L.A. Rules: do you need one for cabinets?

"Do I need a permit for kitchen cabinets in Los Angeles?" Comes up on almost every remodel.

If you are only replacing or refinishing cabinets in the same locations, with no changes to walls, plumbing, gas, or electrical, many projects do not require a full building permit. Once you start moving walls, changing plumbing locations, adding new circuits, or significantly reconfiguring the layout, you are usually in permitted territory.

Always check with your general contractor or the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety before assuming. Good cabinet makers in L.A. Are used to working with permitted projects and coordinating with inspectors where required.

How to find a good cabinet maker in Los Angeles

There is no single "best cabinet maker in Los Angeles" for every project. The right one for you depends on style, budget, and scope.

To find a good cabinet maker, focus less on marketing and more on evidence. Look for a shop that can show you built projects similar to yours, let you see and touch sample boxes and doors, and explain their standard materials and thicknesses without hesitation.

Below is a short list of questions that helps separate solid professionals from thin, bargain bids:

- What thickness do you use for box sides, backs, and shelves, and what materials are they made from?
- How are your drawer boxes built, and what thickness are the sides and bottoms?
- Do you use plywood, MDF, or particleboard near sinks and dishwashers, and how do you protect those areas?
- Who installs the cabinets, and how long does a typical custom kitchen take to install in Los Angeles?
- How do you handle adjustments or modifications after installation if something needs to change?

Their answers will tell you a lot. If they dodge thickness and material questions or brush them off as unimportant, be cautious. If they can walk you through their process of making custom cabinets, from measurement to installation, and explain why they choose a particular thickness in each part of the box, you are probably in better hands.

Measuring, modifications, and life after install

Measuring for custom cabinets is more than grabbing a tape and jotting down a few numbers. A professional will account for crooked walls, out-of-level floors, appliance clearances, door swings, and countertop thickness. If you

are supplying dimensions yourself, ask the cabinet maker for their required measuring guidelines so you do not miss critical points.

Clients sometimes ask if custom cabinets can be modified after installation. Within reason, yes. You can often add pull-outs, change a few shelves, or replace doors later. But major structural changes are hard and sometimes impossible without damaging the finish. That is why it is so important to get the layout and primary storage right before the sawdust starts flying.

Proper material thickness gives you better options later. Sturdy 3/4 inch sides can handle added pull-outs or upgraded drawers. Thin 1/2 inch sides may not hold heavier hardware or added shelves without reinforcement.

As for lifespan, the average life of custom cabinets built from good materials, at appropriate thickness, with quality finishes, is often in the 20 to 40 year range in Los Angeles homes. Poorly built cabinets can look tired or fail in less than ten.

Style, color, and resale value

Thickness and structure matter most to the person living in the home. Style and color matter both to you and to the next buyer.

The most popular kitchen cabinet style in Los Angeles remains some variation of Shaker: a clean, framed or frameless door with simple square edges. Flat slab fronts are gaining ground in modern and midcentury homes. Raised panels are less common in new L.A. Projects, though they still appear in more traditional estates.

People often wonder if white cabinets are going out of style. White remains a safe, versatile choice that brightens small L.A. Kitchens and tends to photograph well for listings. Soft whites and light creams, sometimes paired with a wood island, feel current without being trendy.

If you are thinking about the best cabinet color for resale value, neutrals usually win: whites, soft grays, greige, and light woods. Bolder colors can be beautiful and very "L.A.", but they narrow the buyer pool.

Whatever color you choose, the finish quality matters a lot. The best finish for kitchen cabinets is usually a professional grade conversion varnish or similar catalyzed finish that cures hard, resists chemicals, and can handle daily cleaning. Thick, durable finish on properly prepped material will outlast any color trend.

Financing, pricing, and what you really pay for

Some custom cabinet makers in Los Angeles offer financing, often through third party services. This can soften the impact of a large up front cost, but it does not change the underlying reality that quality materials and thickness cost more.

The markup on custom cabinets reflects the time, expertise, and risk the shop carries. They are responsible for fitting real wood and engineered panels into imperfect walls, coordinating with plumbers and electricians, and standing behind their work over years.

The cheapest way to get "custom looking" cabinets is usually a hybrid: a good semi-custom line with thoughtful design, maybe paired with a few truly custom pieces where the layout demands it. But if your priority is long term durability, especially in an active L.A. Household, pushing your budget toward thicker, better materials usually pays off.

Bringing it together: thick enough to be worth it

When you write your check for a Los Angeles kitchen remodel, it will not itemize "3/4 inch plywood" or "5/8 inch drawer sides." The line will just say "custom cabinets" with a big number next to it.

Behind that number are hundreds of small decisions about thickness, material, and construction quality. Get those decisions right, and the doors will swing straight, the drawers will glide smoothly, and the shelves will stay level long after you forget what you paid.

Ask the thickness questions early. Understand which parts of your cabinets need real heft. Work with a cabinet maker who can show you, in the shop, what they build and how it holds up. That is how you move from worrying about whether custom cabinets are worth the money to simply enjoying a kitchen that feels solid every time you open a drawer.