

# Custom Kitchens With Stock Cabinets

by Chuck Green



As a residential builder and remodeler, I'm often involved in designing my company's kitchens. Because of this, I look for new ideas that will distinguish me from the typical cabinet installer. It was with this in mind that I attended the 1994 Kitchen and Bath Design and Remodeling Show near Philadelphia last October. I wasn't disappointed. The ideas I gathered there have already altered my approach to designing kitchens. Some of the best of these ideas came from Florence Perchuk, a kitchen and bath designer from New York City. Perchuk's forte is creating custom kitchens with stock cabinets. To make this work, she says, it's necessary to see a kitchen not as a collection of counters, cabinets, and appliances, but as a unified space.

The cabinets Perchuk uses are often simple ones from large distributors that we don't associate with custom work. While some of these cabinets are hung right out of the box, many are enhanced with new cabinet pulls, special cutlery holders, wine racks, slide-out bins, and spindle rails.

Perchuk emphasizes that cabinet selection is just one part of the equa-

tion. There's a common tendency to see kitchen design as revolving around the cabinets, with everything else coming in a distant second. With my customers, in fact, cabinet selection and layout has always monopolized the design phase. But it doesn't have to be that way. Perchuk's strategy is to take the focus off of the wall of cabinets and to direct it toward the room's detailing (see Figure 1). For instance, her countertops are usually granite, solid surfacing, or Antique Verde marble. And the spaces surrounding her cabinets have an appeal that invites people to spend time in the kitchen.

The secret is in the details. They include the careful use of colors, intelligent lighting design, angled and curved walls and countertops, and flooring patterns that complement the walls, counters, or cabinets. Clients expect a designer to guide them through all these details, and to explain how each would affect the final design. What would adding a skylight would do for this kitchen? How about a particular tile pattern? Or a valance? One otherwise plain white European cabinet group got granite countertops and angled soffits of stepped wood boards. It was spectacular.



**Figure 1.** The key to creating a designer kitchen with inexpensive cabinets is to put the focus elsewhere. In this kitchen, it's not the cabinets that catch the eye, but the granite countertops, the tile backsplash, the built-in wine rack, and the natural-wood trim.



**Figure 2.** The light soffit above this peninsula makes the low ceiling seem higher. Combining it with the black floor stripe makes the plain cabinets fade into the background.



**Figure 3.** Adding lights to this toe space and turning the drawer into a slide-out counter made life easier for a wheelchair user. But universal design ideas like these also go a long way toward dressing up any kitchen.

In small kitchens, part of Perchuk's strategy is to use simple techniques to open up the space. In one kitchen, she recessed a standard refrigerator into a line of cabinets by removing the wall studs at the back of the refrigerator cavity. The result looked like a built-in unit with a flush front but cost about \$2,000 less. She has also used open shelving, or glass doors and glass shelving, to open up small apartment kitchens. A light box above one peninsula visually raised a low ceiling (Figure 2).

User friendliness is also important. In one home, for example, the standard

countertop height of 36 inches was uncomfortable for both the 5-foot 3-inch woman and the 6-foot 3-inch man. Perchuk made both at home by designing a kitchen with two height zones, one slightly higher than 36 inches and one slightly lower. Yet another kitchen had lights in the toe space beneath the cabinets (Figure 3). Though designed for a client in a wheelchair, it was a neat idea for any small kitchen.

One potential reward from using this strategy is that it can help widen your client base. Many people buy kitchens at large home centers because they expect to save money. But they're seldom excited about the way the cabinets look when installed — the home center kitchen department, after all, is in business to sell cabinets, not to solve design problems. It's hopeless to compete with these giants on price, but if you can create an elegant space with inexpensive stock cabinets, you can give clients more value than the discounters. And you can probably do it for less money than they expect. ■

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