

If you remodel kitchens in Los Angeles for any length of time, you eventually run into the same argument on every job. The homeowner says, "We're just changing cabinets. No walls. No plumbing. Why would the city care?" The contractor looks nervous and says, "It depends what else we're touching."

Both are partly right, and that is where people get into trouble.

Los Angeles has very specific rules about when you need a permit for kitchen cabinets and when you do not. At the same time, the decision about stock, semi-custom, or fully custom cabinets has real cost and resale implications, especially in an expensive, design-driven market like LA.

This guide walks through both sides: the local permit rules and the practical side of working with a cabinet maker. The goal is to help you stay legal, avoid red tags and delays, and spend your money where it actually improves your home.

When Kitchen Cabinets Do Not Need a Permit in Los Angeles

If you are in a single-family home in the City of Los Angeles, and you are simply taking off old cabinets and mounting new ones in the exact same locations, with no changes to walls, plumbing, gas, or electrical, that work is generally considered "finish" work and does not require a building permit.

Typical no-permit cabinet jobs include:

You remove old wall and base cabinets, patch the walls, and install new cabinets in the same layout. The outlets stay where they are, no new circuits are added, and your sink, dishwasher, and range do not move.

You replace only the cabinet doors and drawer fronts, or you reface cabinet boxes with new veneers and add new hardware, again with no changes to utilities or layout.

You repaint or refinish existing cabinets.

The Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety (LADBS) focuses on health, safety, and structural issues. Screwing prebuilt cabinets into existing studs, in the same locations, does not change how the building stands, burns, or drains, so the city usually does not involve itself.

That said, many simple "cabinet only" projects quietly expand. A client decides to move the microwave, add task lighting, or shift the refrigerator to get more countertop. The moment you cross into new electrical, new plumbing, or wall changes, the permit rules change with you.

When You Do Need a Permit for New Kitchen Cabinets in Los Angeles

LADBS looks at the project as a whole, not just your cabinets. If your cabinet plan requires moving infrastructure, you will likely need one or more permits, even if the main goal is "just new cabinets."

Here are practical triggers that usually mean you need permits:

1. You are altering walls or structure

Removing a soffit, furred-out wall, or pantry enclosure to gain more cabinet space usually means a building permit. If anything might be load-bearing, you also need engineering. Even a short, non-structural partition removal technically falls under permitted work.

2. You are moving or adding electrical

New under-cabinet lighting, extra outlets inside a pantry, a dedicated circuit for a built-in microwave, or relocating outlets in a backsplash area all fall under electrical permits. Modern codes also require GFCI and AFCI protection and specific outlet spacing in kitchens. Inspectors take this seriously.

3. You are moving plumbing or gas

Sliding the sink three feet down the wall so the dishwasher lines up better is plumbing work. Adding or relocating a gas line for a range, cooktop, or oven is gas work. Both require permits and inspections.

4. You are opening walls in a condo or multifamily building

For condos and apartments, you often need not only city permits but also HOA or building-management approval. Shared walls, stacked plumbing, fire-rated assemblies, and structural slabs all complicate what seems like “just cabinets.”

5. You are in a special zone or historic property

Homes in historic overlay zones or certain coastal or hillside areas can trigger extra review, even for interior work. If you suspect your property falls into one of these categories, it is worth a quick check before you sign a contract.

It is common for a homeowner to order custom cabinets, then call a contractor late in the process to “just install them.” The contractor walks in, sees that the fridge moved across the room and three new circuits are needed, and suddenly you have a permit issue with six weeks of lead-time cabinets sitting in your garage. This is exactly what you want to avoid.

A Simple Checklist: When to Talk to LADBS Before Ordering Cabinets

Here is one place a short list helps. If any of these apply to your project, you or your contractor should speak with LADBS or a design professional before finalizing cabinet drawings:

- You plan to move your sink, dishwasher, range, or refrigerator.
- You want new under-cabinet lights or more outlets than you currently have.
- You are removing soffits, bump-outs, or any piece of wall to gain cabinet height or length.
- You live in a condo, duplex, or multifamily building.
- Your home is in a hillside, coastal, or historic overlay area.

One quick consultation can save you from opening a wall later and discovering noncompliant plumbing or wiring, which is far more expensive to fix after everything is installed.

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Who Pulls the Permit: Homeowner, Contractor, or Cabinet Maker?

A common misunderstanding is that a cabinet maker will pull permits. Most do not. Their California license, if they have one, is often a C-6 (cabinet, millwork and finish carpentry) classification. That allows them to fabricate and install cabinets but does not always cover full kitchen remodel scope like structural work or complex MEP changes.

Permits are usually pulled by one of two parties:

The general contractor, if you hire one to manage the whole kitchen remodel. They coordinate the electrician, plumber, and inspectors and take responsibility for code compliance.

The homeowner, acting as an owner-builder. You can do this, but you take on full liability and coordination. For anything beyond a very simple job, most people are happier letting a licensed GC handle it.

Some higher-end cabinet shops in Los Angeles do offer “design-build” services, partnering with a GC to manage permits and trades around the cabinets. When you interview companies, ask very specifically how they handle permits and inspections and who is responsible for them.

What Is a Cabinet Maker, Really?

The term “cabinet maker” can sound old fashioned, but the job is highly technical. A good cabinet maker is part designer, part engineer, part craftsman.

In simple terms, what does a cabinet maker do?

They measure your space, design the layout, specify materials, build the cabinets, and often install them. Unlike a big-box store that sells [Kitchen Remodeling Los Angeles](#) prefabricated boxes in fixed sizes, a cabinet maker can

shape the storage and aesthetic around your exact kitchen dimensions.

This is different from a general “carpenter.” Many carpenters do framing, doors, baseboard, and a range of woodwork. A cabinet maker focuses on fine tolerances, complex hardware, and finishes that must look perfect at eye level under harsh kitchen lighting. The difference between a carpenter and a cabinet maker is like the difference between a general mechanic and a specialist who tunes performance engines. There is overlap, but the daily focus is not the same.

Some cabinet makers also produce built-ins, bathroom vanities, wall units, and even freestanding furniture. In Los Angeles, it is common for a shop to design your kitchen, your powder room vanity, and a media cabinet in the living room so the whole house feels cohesive.

Most professional cabinet makers also install what they build. That matters more than people think. A perfectly built cabinet can still look terrible if the installation is off by a quarter inch where it meets an uneven floor or wavy plaster wall. The shop that built the boxes usually knows how to finesse those issues better than someone who just “hangs cabinets” occasionally.

How Custom Cabinets Are Made

If you have only seen cabinets from a warehouse or home center, the custom process looks different.

It usually starts with detailed field measurements and a design meeting. The cabinet maker or designer creates a layout, then refines door styles, panel profiles, face frame or frameless construction, and storage accessories with you. This is also the time to decide whether framed or frameless cabinets fit your needs. Frameless, often called European style, maximizes access and storage, while framed cabinets tend to read more traditional and can be slightly more forgiving on uneven walls.

Once drawings are approved, the shop orders materials and begins cutting components. Custom shops in LA typically use cabinet-grade plywood for boxes, with hardwood face frames and doors if you choose a stained finish. Thickness is important. For long-lasting cabinets, most professionals prefer 3/4 inch plywood for sides and shelves, with 1/2 inch backs at a minimum. Thin backs and particleboard sides are places where cheap cabinets tend to fail first.

Assembly, sanding, and finishing (paint or stain plus clear coats) happen in the shop, not on site. A good finish is crucial in a kitchen. Catalyzed lacquer and high-quality conversion varnish are common choices because they resist moisture, oil, and repeated cleaning better than basic wall paint. The best finish for kitchen cabinets is one that balances durability with the look you want. A dead-flat, chalky white can be beautiful, but in a heavy-use kitchen it may telegraph every fingerprint and scuff.

After curing, the cabinets are delivered and installed. The installation sequence typically interlocks with countertop templating, backsplash work, flooring, and appliance connections, which is why coordination with your GC or project manager is so important.

How Long Do Custom Cabinets Take?

Timelines vary by shop workload and complexity, but some general ranges hold in Los Angeles:

Design and approvals can take anywhere from two to six weeks, depending on how decisive you are and whether HOA or city reviews are involved.

Fabrication for a typical kitchen often runs six to ten weeks once drawings and finishes are final and deposits paid. Highly detailed or specialty work can push beyond that.

Installation of a full custom kitchen typically takes three to seven working days on site, not counting countertop and tile. If you are also moving walls, adding windows, or redoing flooring, the entire custom kitchen process from demolition to final punch list often runs eight to twelve weeks, and larger or more complex projects can go longer.

One of the biggest mistakes I see is clients ordering custom cabinets before they have resolved permit issues. If LADBS requires changes to walls, plumbing, or electrical, your cabinets may no longer fit the approved layout. Always lock in the permitted plan before signing off on final cabinet dimensions.

What Custom Cabinets Cost in Los Angeles

Costs vary widely, but it helps to have honest ranges rather than vague reassurances.

For a typical LA-area kitchen, custom cabinets from a reputable shop usually start somewhere in the low five figures and commonly fall in the 25,000 to 60,000 dollar range, depending on size, materials, and complexity. High-end jobs with exotic veneers, integrated lighting, and built-in furniture elements can cross six figures.

Breaking that down a bit, many shops think in terms of cost per linear foot or cost per cabinet box. With custom work in Los Angeles, it is not unusual to see effective pricing from roughly 900 to 1,700 dollars per linear foot of cabinetry, all inclusive of design, fabrication, finishing, and basic installation. Very simple or very high-volume shops may come in lower. Top tier boutique work with complex finishes or curved pieces will come in higher.

So how much should you pay for custom cabinets? Enough to get solid materials, a durable finish, and careful installation, but not so much that you are just funding a lavish showroom and a thick markup. Markup on custom cabinets is often in the 30 to 50 percent range after materials and labor, sometimes more for elite brands. That is not inherently bad; overhead, warranties, and design staff cost real money. Just know that you have a right to ask how a bid is structured and what you are getting for premium pricing.

For context, stock cabinets from a big box store might furnish a small kitchen for as little as 6,000 to 12,000 dollars in materials. Semi-custom lines that allow you to tweak sizes and finishes often land in the middle, say 15,000 to 30,000 dollars installed for an average kitchen. It is not always cheaper to have cabinets made than to buy them. At the very low end, stock usually wins on price. Where custom cabinets shine is in awkward spaces, design-driven homes, and higher price brackets where the kitchen is a major resale focal point.

Are Custom Cabinets Worth the Money?

In Los Angeles, where homes are expensive and kitchens often sell the house, custom cabinets can absolutely be a good investment, but only under certain conditions.

They make the most sense when your existing layout wastes space or fights the architecture, when wall or floor conditions are irregular, or when your home's value is high enough that buyers expect a certain level of finish. In those situations, custom cabinets can add real value, not just cosmetic appeal. They maximize storage, clean up sightlines, and can last decades. The average lifespan of well-built custom cabinets easily runs 25 years or more with reasonable care. Cheap particleboard boxes, on the other hand, often show swelling, sagging, or hardware failures in under ten.

If you are in a modest condo with a fixed resale ceiling, pouring 60,000 dollars into cabinets alone will likely not pencil out financially. In that scenario, semi-custom cabinets or a mix of refacing and selective replacement might offer better return.

Some shops also offer financing, either directly or through third-party lenders, especially at the mid to high end. Financing can stretch payments, but remember that interest adds to the effective cost. If you use financing to

reach for more cabinet than your home supports, resale wise, you are unlikely to see that money back.

Materials: Plywood vs MDF, Wood Species, and Finishes

Materials drive both performance and price.

For cabinet boxes, cabinet-grade plywood is usually the best balance of strength, weight, and moisture resistance. High quality plywood, with multiple plies and minimal voids, holds screws well and resists the minor leaks and steam that kitchens endure. MDF has its place, particularly for painted doors and end panels, because it machines smoothly and does not telegraph grain. Are plywood cabinets better than MDF? For structural parts like boxes and shelves, yes, plywood is typically better. For painted doors with intricate profiles, MDF can be excellent when properly sealed.

When clients ask what material is best for kitchen cabinets, I look at three layers: box, doors, and finish. An ideal combination for most Los Angeles kitchens is plywood boxes, hardwood or quality MDF doors, and a professional-grade catalyzed finish in a color that suits both your taste and the local market.

As for the best wood for custom cabinets, it depends on the look. Maple and alder are common for painted or lightly stained contemporary work. Walnut and white oak dominate higher-end projects right now, especially in rift or quartered cuts for a calm grain. Cherry is less trendy but still beautiful in certain traditional homes.

Finish matters as much as species. The best finish for kitchen cabinets is one that stands up to cleaning without ambering too quickly or showing every smudge. Satin and low-sheen finishes are popular because they hide minor imperfections and fingerprints better than high gloss.

Style and Color: What Works in Los Angeles Kitchens

Trends change, but some patterns hold.

The most popular kitchen cabinet style in Los Angeles over the last decade has been some version of Shaker: clean, square-edged frames with a recessed center panel. It sits comfortably between traditional and modern and works in bungalows, Spanish revivals, and contemporary homes.

Frameless European-style cabinets also have a strong foothold, especially in more modern or mid-century houses. Frameless construction maximizes interior space and gives you tight, even gaps between doors, which suits more minimal, handle-less designs.

Are white cabinets going out of style? Pure bright white kitchens have softened a bit, but white still sells, particularly when paired with warmer wood tones and softer whites rather than stark, high-contrast schemes. For resale, the best cabinet color is usually a neutral palette: soft whites, warm grays, greige tones, or light natural wood. Bold colors can be spectacular and on trend, but if you plan to move in a few years, staying closer to the middle of the spectrum is safer.

The most expensive kitchen cabinets tend to pair high labor content with costly materials: custom veneers, hand-applied specialty finishes, touch-latch hardware, integrated lighting, and complex curves. Price follows complexity and brand reputation as much as it follows species.

If you want the cheapest way to get something that feels custom, look at semi-custom cabinet lines that allow you to fill odd gaps with panels and filler, combined with a few made-to-order pieces from a local shop to solve unique challenges. Thoughtful design often saves more money than simply choosing the lowest per-box price.

Refacing, Refinishing, or Replacing: Permit and Cost Angles

Not every kitchen needs entirely new cabinets. In Los Angeles, where labor and material rates are high, cabinet refacing and refinishing can be smart moves.

Refinishing means you keep your existing doors and boxes and simply strip, stain, or paint them, often with updated hardware. That is typically the cheapest approach if your cabinet boxes and doors are solid and the layout works. You might spend from a few thousand dollars for a small, straightforward kitchen to the mid-teens for a large job with on-site spraying and careful masking.

Refacing means new doors and drawer fronts and a new skin over the visible cabinet frames, often in a different color or material. How much does it cost to reface kitchen cabinets in Los Angeles? For an average kitchen, refacing commonly runs somewhere in the 8,000 to 20,000 dollar range, depending on size, door style, and finish. For many homeowners, cabinet refacing is worth it, because you get a brand new look without paying for new boxes or major demolition.

Whether it is cheaper to refinish or replace kitchen cabinets depends on the condition of the old boxes and how much you want to change the layout. If your layout works, boxes are sturdy, and you mainly hate the color or door style, refacing or refinishing is usually less expensive than full replacement.

From a permit standpoint, refacing and refinishing virtually never trigger city permits by themselves, as long as you are not adding or moving electrical, plumbing, or walls at the same time.

Finding and Evaluating a Good Cabinet Maker in Los Angeles

Choosing the right cabinet maker is as important as choosing the right material. A mediocre shop can turn excellent plywood into a crooked, squeaky mess, while a skilled shop can do wonders even with a tight budget.

How do you find a good cabinet maker? Referrals from general contractors, designers, and friends with kitchens you genuinely like are the best source. Showrooms can be useful, but keep in mind you are seeing their best, most staged work, not their everyday output.

What should you look for in a cabinet maker? Focus on communication, drawings, material transparency, and responsiveness. Ask to see a recent job that has been lived in for at least a year, not just fresh installs. Open doors and drawers. Check that gaps are even, soft-close hardware works smoothly, and finishes have not already chipped at high-use points.

To gauge skill, you want clear, detailed shop drawings, not just sketches. You want written specs for materials, including whether boxes are plywood or MDF, how thick the panels are, what finish system they use, and which hardware brands they install. A good cabinet maker is comfortable explaining the process of making custom cabinets in plain language: from measurements through fabrication and installation.

Here is a short set of questions that often reveals a lot in fifteen minutes:

- What materials and thicknesses do you use for boxes, shelves, and backs, and why?
- Who installs your cabinets, and how do you handle leveling in an out-of-square room?
- How long does it take to make custom cabinets for a kitchen my size, from approved drawings to delivery?
- Do you also handle bathroom vanities and built-ins, and can you coordinate with my countertop fabricator?
- How do you handle punch-list items or modifications if something in the field changes?

Notice you are not asking, "Are you the best cabinet maker in Los Angeles?" Anyone can answer yes to that. You are asking questions that reveal process and professionalism. You will know quickly whether you are speaking with

a seasoned shop or someone improvising.

Cabinets, Countertops, and Modifications After Installation

Many homeowners are surprised to learn how interconnected cabinets and countertops are. Some cabinet makers also fabricate and install countertops, especially in laminate or butcher block. For stone and quartz, they usually partner with specialized fabricators who template after cabinets are installed and secured.

If you expect the cabinet maker to coordinate countertops, ask explicitly. Clarify who is responsible for scheduling the templater, reviewing seams, and ensuring support for overhangs. Miscommunication here can lead to sagging bars or cracked stone at cutouts.

Another recurring question is whether custom cabinets can be modified after installation. The honest answer is “sometimes, but it is rarely cheap.” Slight height tweaks for appliance clearances, added rollout trays, or converting a hinged door to drawers are often possible. Moving large sections of installed cabinetry or dramatically changing layout usually costs more than people expect because it involves patching floors, walls, and countertops as well as the cabinets themselves.

If you anticipate future changes, mention them up front. A thoughtful cabinet maker can often design flexibility into the layout, such as using removable panels where you may later want a built-in fridge, or leaving structure to support a future appliance garage without tearing apart the whole wall.

Final Thought: Align the Paperwork With the Woodwork

Permits and cabinets may feel like separate worlds, but they intersect directly in your kitchen. The permit side governs where walls, pipes, and wires can go. The cabinet side shapes how you live and work in that space every day.

In Los Angeles, you generally do not need a permit for simple, like-for-like cabinet replacement. The moment you start moving appliances, adding circuits, or opening walls, assume that LADBS and possibly your HOA will have a say. Resolve that framework first, then let your cabinet maker do what they do best inside those boundaries.

Handled in the right order, you get a kitchen that satisfies both the city inspector and the person who actually cooks in it. That is the sweet spot: code-compliant on paper, and a pleasure to use in real life.