

Getting measurements right is the quiet, unglamorous part of a beautiful kitchen. You do not brag about your wall being 96 1/8 inches high, but that tiny number decides whether your custom cabinets look like they belong there or like they were squeezed in as an afterthought.

As a cabinet maker who has worked in older Los Angeles bungalows, mid-century ranches in the Valley, and new construction in the hills, I can tell you this: walls are rarely straight, ceilings are rarely level, and almost nothing is exactly the size you think it is. Good measuring protects you from surprises after the cabinets are built and paid for.

This guide walks you through how to measure for custom cabinets in a way that your cabinet maker can actually use, while also giving you the context you need to make smart decisions about materials, costs, and timelines in the Los Angeles market.

What a cabinet maker actually does (and how that affects measuring)

A lot of people start with a basic question: What is a cabinet maker, and what does a cabinet maker do that is so different from a regular carpenter?

A cabinet maker focuses on built-in storage: kitchen cabinets, bathroom vanities, media units, closets, and sometimes custom furniture that needs fine joinery and precise fit. A carpenter, on the other hand, usually works on structural elements such as framing, decking, rough construction, and sometimes finish trim. There is overlap, but cabinet making is more like furniture building that happens to be attached to your walls.

Because of that, cabinet makers live and die by measurements. A framer can be off by a quarter inch and shim something later. A cabinet door that is off by a quarter inch will rub, bind, or look crooked forever.

When you ask, "How are custom cabinets made?" or "What is the process of making custom cabinets?" the short version is:

- The space is measured, usually multiple times.
- A design is created with exact dimensions for every cabinet box, face frame (if any), and door.
- Material is chosen, often plywood or MDF for the boxes, and hardwood or MDF for the doors and face frames.
- Parts are cut, assembled, sanded, finished, then delivered and installed.

Each step depends on accurate measurements at the start. If you, as the homeowner, give your cabinet maker reliable dimensions, the design will be more accurate, the quote will be tighter, and the install will go more smoothly.

Why measuring in Los Angeles homes can be tricky

Los Angeles housing stock is a strange mix. I have measured 1920s Spanish homes where the kitchen walls leaned out by more than an inch from floor to ceiling, and newer hillside homes where a settling foundation left a visible slope across the room.

In LA, you will often see:

- Plaster walls that are wavy, especially in older neighborhoods like Hancock Park or parts of Silver Lake.
- Floors that are out of level by half an inch or more across a typical kitchen run.
- Ceilings that dip or crown over large spans.

None of this is a problem as long as you measure correctly and your cabinet maker plans for it. Custom kitchen cabinets cost more in Los Angeles partly because we spend time scribing cabinets to uneven walls, building custom fillers, and adjusting toe kicks and crown to hide those irregularities.

If you assume your room is square and level, your measurements will be fantasy numbers. The tape never lies. The trick is knowing what and where to measure.

Tools you need before you start

You do not need a contractor's van to measure like a pro. For almost every homeowner, a short list of tools is enough.

Here is a practical measuring kit:

- 25-foot tape measure that locks firmly
- 4-foot level (or a reliable laser level)
- Pencil and a hard-back notebook or graph paper
- Blue painter's tape
- A smartphone with a camera and flashlight

The tape measure is obvious. The level tells you how bad your floors and ceilings actually are. The notebook is where you sketch the room and write real numbers, not guesses. Painter's tape lets you mock up cabinet sizes on the wall at full scale, which is surprisingly helpful before you commit. Photos capture context: vents, outlets, existing plumbing, odd soffits, and anything you might forget to mention later.

Preparing the space so measurements are accurate

Before you start running the tape, clear as much clutter as you reasonably can. You do not need to empty the kitchen, but moving small appliances, trash cans, and free-standing islands out of the way prevents measurement errors.

If walls are open or you are mid-remodel, confirm whether any framing changes are still planned. A wall that will be furred out, straightened, or moved even an inch changes cabinet sizes.

For Los Angeles specifically, keep permits in mind. Most of the time, replacing kitchen cabinets in the same layout does not require a permit from the city. The moment you move a sink, alter electrical circuits, relocate gas lines, or change walls, permitting gets involved. When you speak with your cabinet maker or general contractor, ask directly, "Do I need a permit for kitchen cabinets in Los Angeles with the scope I am planning?" That answer affects how final your current measurements really are.

If you are planning to refinish or reface rather than replace, your preparation is simpler. In that case, accurate door and drawer front sizes matter more than room dimensions, and your cabinet maker will often measure those for you.

Step-by-step: how to measure for custom cabinets

You can absolutely hand everything off and let a professional handle measurements. In fact, for a full custom job, I strongly recommend that a cabinet maker or installer verify all measurements before production.

That said, when homeowners bring thoughtful measurements and clear sketches to our first meeting, the design moves faster, quotes are more accurate, and fewer surprises pop up.

Here is a simple measuring process that works for most kitchens:

1. Sketch the room as a bird's-eye view, drawing each wall where cabinets will go.
2. Measure wall lengths, then ceiling height, writing every dimension directly on the sketch.
3. Mark and measure all openings: doors, windows, hallways, and any cased openings.
4. Locate and measure obstructions: vents, pipes, soffits, radiators, electrical panels, etc.
5. Double-check critical spans and note floor and ceiling out-of-level conditions.

Now let us unpack how to do each of these correctly.

1. Sketch the room

Do not worry about artistry. You are not drawing to scale, just giving yourself reference points.

Stand at one corner of the kitchen and draw each wall as a straight line. Label them "Wall A", "Wall B", and so on. Draw in any openings roughly where they appear: windows, doors, archways. Mark where appliances sit: fridge, range, dishwasher, sink.

If the kitchen is open to a living or dining room, lightly sketch that opening too, so your cabinet maker understands edges and sightlines.

2. Measure wall lengths and ceiling height

Start with one wall and measure from corner to corner at countertop height, which is roughly 36 inches off the floor. Write that number on your sketch next to the wall line.

Then measure the same wall again, this time tight against the floor. Finally, measure near the ceiling. Older Los Angeles homes often show a different number at each height. If your wall measures 145 inches at the floor, $144 \frac{5}{8}$ at 36 inches, and $144 \frac{1}{4}$ at the ceiling, note them all. Your cabinet maker then knows the room pinches slightly as you go up.

Next, measure from finished floor to ceiling in at least three locations: each corner of the room and somewhere near the middle. Standard LA kitchens might have an 8-foot or 9-foot ceiling, but remodels, dropped soffits, and beams can complicate that. Precise ceiling height is crucial if you want full-height cabinets or a specific gap above the uppers.

If the floor is not finished yet, write that down, along with the thickness of the flooring that will be installed. Three-quarter-inch hardwood, tile plus thinset, or engineered flooring all change final cabinet and appliance clearances.

3. Measure doors, windows, and openings

Now go back to each wall and measure the exact size of every opening, plus its position on the wall.

For a window, measure:

- Width and height of the window opening, including the trim.
- Distance from the floor to the bottom of the sill.
- Distance from the adjacent corner to the outside edge of the trim.

This is where you avoid the classic mistake of planning a sink base that looks perfectly centered in the design software but ends up two inches off center from the window in reality.

For doors and cased openings, measure the width of the opening including casing, and the height from floor to top of casing. Then measure from the corner of the room to the edge of the casing. Pay special attention to swing direction of doors and how refrigerator doors or oven doors will interact with them.

If your kitchen opens to a hallway, record that opening width as well. In Los Angeles, inspectors care about certain clearances in remodels, especially around egress paths, even when the work seems “just cosmetic.”

4. Record appliances and utilities

Appliances chew up cabinet space and need clearances that stock plans often gloss over. Write down exact widths for your fridge, range, cooktop, wall ovens, and dishwasher. If you do not own them yet, find the specification sheets for the models you are considering.

Pay attention to:

- Required space for doors to open fully.
- Vent hood requirements if you have a powerful gas range.
- Landing space recommended on both sides of certain appliances.

Then locate plumbing, gas, and electrical. Measure centerlines, not just approximate locations. For example, note “sink drain center 52 inches from left corner, 19 inches above finished floor.” That helps your cabinet maker design the sink base and adjacent drawer banks so pipes do not fight with drawer boxes.

If existing outlets are at odd heights or in the middle of a backsplash area, photograph them and write a note. Your electrician may move them, but until that happens, your cabinet and tile layout depends on where they really are.

5. Check for out-of-level conditions

Finally, take your level and run it across the floor along the main cabinet runs. If the bubble drifts consistently to one side, your floor has a slope.

Note the worst case, something like “floor drops $\frac{5}{8}$ inch over 10 feet from left to right on Wall A.” That tells your cabinet maker how much adjustability they must build into the toe kicks and shims so that your countertops still end up level.

Do the same for ceilings if you plan crown moulding. A ceiling that dips in the middle can create an unsightly gap above perfectly straight cabinet tops unless the installer anticipates it.

How these measurements shape design and cost

Once you hand accurate measurements to a custom cabinet maker, the conversation moves from vague estimates to real planning.

In Los Angeles, homeowners often ask, “How much should I pay for custom cabinets?” or “How much do custom kitchen cabinets cost in Los Angeles?” For full custom work, a realistic range is often in the ballpark of 900 to 1,600 dollars per linear foot of cabinetry, sometimes more for exotic woods or high-end finishes. A small galley kitchen might start around 18,000 to 25,000 dollars for cabinets alone, while a larger, more detailed kitchen can easily climb well past 40,000.

Measurements affect this in a few ways:

A long, uninterrupted wall is more efficient and usually cheaper per foot than a chopped-up space full of tiny filler cabinets. Odd jogs, ducts that need to be wrapped, or severely out-of-square corners add labor and custom parts. Tall ceilings with stacked uppers increase material and install time. Precise measurements reveal these complexities early, so you can decide whether the extra cost is worth the aesthetic or storage gain.

Custom vs stock vs semi-custom: where your measurements matter most

A lot of budget questions swirl around whether custom cabinets are worth the money, or if it is cheaper to buy cabinets or have them made.

Stock cabinets are pre-made in fixed widths, usually in 3-inch increments. Semi-custom allows some modification in width and depth, plus more door styles and finishes. Full custom is sized to your room down to the eighth of an inch.

In a new, very rectangular condo, stock or semi-custom can sometimes work excellently. In an older Los Angeles home with crooked walls and unique architecture, custom cabinets solve real problems:

- You get exact fit with minimal fillers.
- You can build around odd obstacles or integrate pantries and appliance garages in ways stock lines cannot.
- You can choose interior materials, hardware quality, and construction details instead of accepting whatever the factory uses.

Are custom cabinets better than stock cabinets for everyone? Not necessarily. They are better when your space, design goals, or long-term plans demand flexibility and durability.

The difference between custom and semi-custom cabinets often shows up in the gaps. Semi-custom works from a catalog, then fills awkward spaces with panels and fillers. Custom works from your room outward, so every line, reveal, and panel is intentional. Good measurements bring that benefit to life.

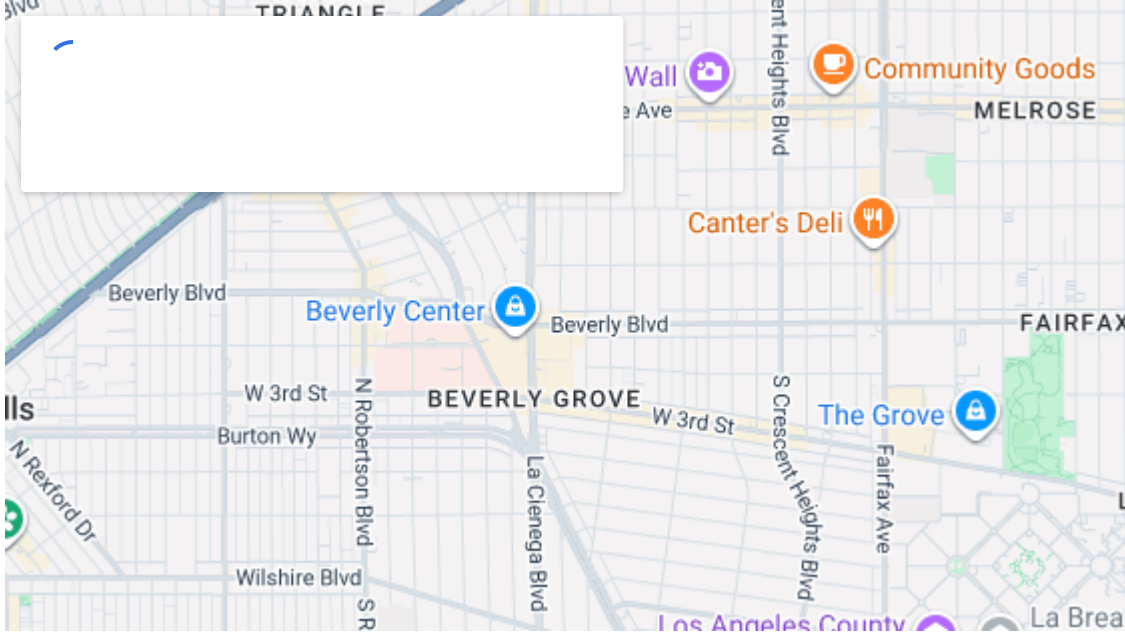
Materials: plywood, MDF, and the best wood for custom cabinets

Another common set of questions revolves around materials. What material is best for kitchen cabinets? Are plywood cabinets better than MDF? What is the best wood for custom cabinets?

For cabinet boxes in a Los Angeles kitchen, a high-quality plywood is often the sweet spot. It offers excellent strength, holds screws well, and handles moisture swings better than particleboard. MDF is heavier and denser, with a perfectly smooth surface, which makes it great for painted doors and panels. It does not like standing water, but inside a normal cabinet, properly sealed, it works very well.

So are plywood cabinets better than MDF? For boxes that might get damp or carry heavy loads, plywood usually wins. For painted doors and detailed profiles, MDF frequently looks cleaner and resists cracking at joints.

As for the best wood for custom cabinet faces, it depends on style:



- Maple and birch are popular for smooth painted finishes.
- White oak, especially rift or quarter sawn, is highly sought after in modern and transitional LA kitchens.
- Walnut brings warmth and richness in mid-century and contemporary designs.

All of those perform well if the cabinet maker uses proper thicknesses. A common spec for quality boxes is $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood for sides, tops, bottoms, and shelves, with $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch or $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch plywood for backs. If you are asking, "How thick should custom cabinet wood be?" that $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch benchmark for structural parts is a good sign of a serious build.

Finish matters too. The best finish for kitchen cabinets combines durability, cleanability, and the look you want. Two-part catalyzed finishes are common in professional shops because they cure hard and resist household chemicals. High quality waterborne finishes have also become popular, with lower odor and good toughness. Your cabinet maker should be able to describe their finish system in detail, not just say "paint."

Design choices: framed vs frameless, styles, and colors

In Los Angeles, the most popular kitchen cabinet style in recent years has been some version of Shaker: a simple recessed panel door that plays nicely with both traditional and modern elements. Flat slab fronts are gaining ground in contemporary homes, especially when paired with white oak or walnut.

Clients often worry whether white cabinets are going out of style. All-white kitchens have peaked, but white upper cabinets with warmer wood lowers, or white mixed with a statement island, still photograph well and sell well. When you care about resale, the best cabinet color is usually a timeless neutral palette: soft whites, creams, warm grays, or natural wood tones.

You will also face a choice between framed and frameless construction. Framed cabinets have a face frame on the front, which the doors attach to. Frameless cabinets, often called European style, have doors that attach directly to the box. Frameless construction gives slightly more interior space and a cleaner, more modern look. Framed construction offers a more traditional appearance and can be a bit more forgiving in older, uneven spaces. Both can be excellent when built correctly.

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Timelines: how long custom cabinets really take

Los Angeles homeowners are often surprised by how long the process runs. How long does it take to make custom cabinets? Once designs, measurements, and materials are finalized, a typical shop might need 6 to 12 weeks for fabrication, depending on workload, complexity, and finish schedule.

How long does a custom kitchen take to install? For a straightforward kitchen with ready walls and flooring, cabinet install alone might run 3 to 5 days. Add a few days for crown, panels, and adjustments. Countertops usually template after cabinets are in, then return for install 1 to 3 weeks later. Backsplash, appliances, and final touch-ups extend the total kitchen remodel timeline.

Measurements you take now affect all of this. If your cabinet maker discovers bad numbers at install, delays ripple through countertop and appliance schedules.

Cost, value, and whether custom cabinets are worth it

"Are custom cabinets worth the money?" comes up in almost every first meeting. The honest answer: it depends on the house, your plans, and your expectations.

In LA, the cost to remodel kitchen cabinets can range widely. Swapping in stock cabinets from a big-box store and doing much of the labor yourself might run in the mid-thousands. Professional installation of semi-custom cabinets for a moderate kitchen can land in the teens or low twenties. Full custom, as mentioned earlier, often starts in the high teens and rises from there, depending on scale and materials.

Why are custom cabinets so expensive compared to stock? Labor in a local shop, finish quality, thicker materials, fully adjustable interiors, and made-to-fit solutions all add cost. The markup on custom cabinets covers not just

materials but design time, shop labor, overhead, delivery, and installation. Healthy shops price to survive long term, not just to win a bid this week.

Are custom cabinets a good investment? In many Los Angeles neighborhoods, a well-executed kitchen remodel boosts resale value and marketability. Custom cabinets that look built for the house are often a visible part of that. The average lifespan of custom cabinets, when built and installed well, can easily reach 25 to 40 years or more, especially with periodic hinge adjustments and gentle use.

If you are looking for the cheapest way to get custom cabinets, be careful. True custom shops that are dramatically cheaper than the competition often cut corners on materials, hardware, or finish. A better approach is to simplify the design, reduce the number of bells and whistles, or limit custom work to the most visible areas.

Remember that sometimes it is cheaper to refinish or replace, depending on the condition of your existing boxes. Refinishing can be worth it when the layout works, the boxes are solid plywood, and you just hate the color. Cabinet refacing is worth it when the boxes are structurally sound but you want a completely new door style. In Los Angeles, refacing jobs can start in the mid-thousands and rise with door style, finish, and hardware. At some point, if labor creeps up and boxes are mediocre, it becomes cheaper long-term to replace the cabinets entirely.

Finding and evaluating a good cabinet maker in Los Angeles

People often ask, “How do I find a good cabinet maker?” and even “Who is the best cabinet maker in Los Angeles?” There is no single best for everyone, but there are clear signs that someone knows their craft.

When you meet with a shop, pay attention to how they respond to [Cabinet Refacing Los Angeles](#) your measurements. A good cabinet maker will verify them rather than blindly accept them. They will ask follow-up questions about wall conditions, ceiling heights, and floor levels. If you showed them careful notes and they glance over them in 30 seconds, that is a small red flag.

Key things to look for in a cabinet maker include:

- Clear, written proposals that spell out materials, construction methods, hardware brands, and finish types.
- Willingness to walk you through how custom cabinets are made in their shop.
- Real timelines and honest discussion of potential delays, not “no problem, we can do anything” answers to everything.
- Photos of past work in homes similar to yours, not just showroom pieces.
- A track record with contractors, designers, or past clients you can actually call.

Ask specific questions: Are the cabinet boxes plywood or particleboard? Are drawer boxes solid wood with dovetail joints, or something else? Do cabinet makers install cabinets themselves or use subcontractors, and who will be on site in your house? Do they also do countertops, or coordinate with a stone fabricator? Can they build matching bathroom vanities or a media console so the whole home feels cohesive?

You can also ask whether they offer financing for custom cabinets, if that is relevant to you. Some shops partner with third-party lenders, others prefer direct payment schedules.

To judge quality, look closely at how doors line up, how drawers slide, and how neatly crown and fillers meet walls and ceilings. The straightness of a reveal tells you more than any brochure language.

After install: modifications, maintenance, and reality

Even with perfect measurements and careful design, once you live with the kitchen you may wonder, “Can custom cabinets be modified after installation?” The answer is: sometimes, but it is always more limited and more expensive than doing it right up front.

Small modifications, such as adding pull-out trays, changing some shelves to drawers, or adjusting soft-close hinges, are easy. Moving whole cabinet boxes, resizing openings for larger appliances, or changing door styles is more complex. If you anticipate upgrading to a bigger fridge or range down the line, tell your cabinet maker early so that clearances can be built in.

With use, expect to periodically adjust hinges, especially on tall doors. Wood and even MDF respond to humidity and temperature changes, particularly in unconditioned, sun-exposed LA homes. A quick tune-up keeps doors from sagging or rubbing.

Bringing it all together

Good measurements are the foundation of good cabinets. They tell your cabinet maker what they are really working with, not what the house “should” be. From there, all the other decisions about custom versus stock, plywood versus MDF, white oak versus painted Shaker, framed versus frameless, and even permit and timeline questions become easier to answer.

If you take the time to walk through your kitchen with a tape measure, a level, and a notebook, then sit down with a capable cabinet maker, you give yourself the best chance at a Los Angeles kitchen that not only looks beautiful on day one, but still feels right ten or twenty years later.