



Kitchen Cabinets: Replace, Re-Face, Refinish or Paint

We all spend lots of time in the kitchen; it has become the center of activity in many homes. What if your cabinets are older and showing their age, and you are ready to “fix-it”? What about the nasty dark stains around the handles on the cabinet doors? Should you replace or restore your kitchen cabinets? You have many options and price ranges to consider.

Your options include:

1. **Replace** – Costly; may need a designer and carpenter; you’ll get exactly what you want; allows for new layout and design features.
2. **Re-face** – Can be pricey; works well if the frames of the cabinets are sound; frames and doors can look like new; door and drawer fronts are often replaced and thin veneer placed over the cabinet frames; often needs professional installation.
3. **Refinish** – Good if the cabinets are in good condition and just have surface finish damage; can result in a like-new appearance; similar to restoring antique furniture; professional help may be in order.
4. **Repaint** – Looks good if done properly; least expensive; does not allow for changes in the design or layout; cabinets must be in good shape; paint is now considered a modern finish for cabinets.

Painting Kitchen Cabinets

Despite what you see on some of the cute, popular and trendy (cheap, quick and wrong?) fix-it shows on TV, you should not just slap a coat of paint on your existing cabinets. You would get a quick change of color. You would also get a maintenance and durability problem that will never be resolved

without complete surface preparation and repainting. You need to dismantle, prep the surfaces, prime and then paint for a durable and professional finish.

Preparation, Dismantling and Hardware

For a quality paint job, you must remove cabinet doors, drawers and hardware. When the cabinets are dismantled, you will be able to work on the doors and drawers as horizontal surfaces, and you can easily prep and paint where the hardware was mounted.

This is also a good time to consider replacing hardware – hinges and door handles. Remember that you must match the drilled hole pattern or tackle the big job of patching holes and then re-mounting hardware. Your best bet is to match the existing hardware layout or add a pull with a back plate that covers the existing holes.

Replacing and mounting hinges can also be tricky if you go with a new style. The type and design of the new hinge must match the existing hinge. The hinge must also work with the type of door and cabinet frame. If the new hinges don’t match the old, think twice about the replacement.

You will need a flat working surface on which to lay out doors. Sawhorses supporting a plywood work surface are a good option. You could also protect your countertops with plywood and drop cloths and work from there.

Surface Prep

The key to every paint job is surface preparation. The surface must be smooth, clean, dust-free, grease-free and not too shiny. You must smooth any imperfections that will show through the paint, like chips, flakes or sharp edges.

Scrub the surface to be painted with steel wool or a coarse rag soaked with mineral sprits. The steel wool will help remove stubborn deposits. Don’t use the

standard metal steel wool; try the newer synthetic steel wool. It looks like a kitchen pan-scrubbing pad and is an effective scrubbing tool that will not rust or fall apart like typical steel wool. 3M makes a variety of synthetic steel wool pads, some with a scrubbing pad mounted to a plastic plate and handle.

Be very careful when working with solvents or detergents. Follow the label safety precautions, and use lots of ventilation. Some solvents are flammable, so don't work around a pilot light or any other source of ignition.

You could also scrub the surface with a strong detergent like a TSP substitute or MEX. These strong detergents will cut through dirt and grease. They will even etch the surface of the paint or finish. For stubborn stains, again use synthetic steel wool. The key is a clean surface with roughened paint. Etching the paint is a good thing.

After cleaning the cabinets, rinse well, either with clear water and a rag or with clean solvent. Rinsing removes any residue. Now you will have a clean surface.

Smooth the Finish

Any imperfections in the surface must be filled and smoothed or they will show through the paint. All edges of paint chips must be sanded smooth to eliminate sharp edges. All holes or cracks must be filled. If you'll be painting, you can fill imperfections with any quality wood filler and then sand the surface.

Sanding can be completed with medium grade paper because you don't need a perfectly smooth surface. Use the finest grade sandpaper that accomplishes a smooth surface. After sanding, vacuum the surfaces and use a tack cloth to pick up any remaining dust.

Prime

Once you've got a clean, dust-free, smooth surface, you must prime for painting. Why prime? Primers are specifically designed to bond to a surface, hide imperfections, and provide a uniform surface for the final coat. The final coat is not designed to stick to a bare or non-uniform surface.

Primers also even out surface color variations and cover some surface imperfections. I suggest a high-quality oil-based primer or BIN. BIN is shellac-

based, bonds well and provides a great base. It is low-odor and dries quickly. Primer can be applied with a pad or a paintbrush – I prefer a high-quality paintbrush. With BIN, tools can be cleaned with ammonia or solvent.

Since your cabinet doors are lying flat on a work surface, you can easily smooth on the primer with a light final brushing. I suggest you paint the top surface and sides, allow them to dry and then paint the back side while supporting the doors on wooden dowels or strips of wood trim that contact the door in a small area. You can also support the doors with screws in the mounting holes and prime the whole door at once.

Allow the primer to dry. BIN will dry in one hour under normal conditions. Oil- and water-based primers will take longer; follow label directions.

Final Coat

For a final coat, I suggest an oil-based or alkyd top coat. I think alkyd-based enamels still provide a tougher finish than water-based paints. Oil-based finishes can also have a very glossy appearance if desired. The new oil finishes are low-odor and great at leveling to eliminate brush marks.

Apply the finish with a china bristle brush. Brush out the finish with a light brush stroke for a smooth surface. "Brushing out" means you have coated the surface with paint and you then softly brush over the flat areas to blend and smooth the paint. This helps eliminate brush marks. A good paint, properly applied, will show limited brush marks, particularly on horizontal finishes. This makes that gloss finish very smooth and shiny.

Reassemble

Allow the paint to dry for at least 24 hours. Follow the directions for the paint product you select. Ambient conditions will affect drying/curing time. Reassemble all the doors and cabinets, and add the pulls.

Refinishing Kitchen Cabinets

Many kitchen cabinets are finished like furniture – stained, with a clear protective top coat added. Cabinets that are factory built or done in larger cabinet shops may be finished with lacquer or a special clear coat. Cabinets from smaller shops or those finished on site may be oil-stained and finished with clear oil-based varnish.

Refinishing cabinets is like refinishing old wood furniture. You can clean and remove part of the top clear surface with special solvents, even out the color and apply a top coat for a perfect finish. This means you can maintain the patina or color and appearance of the wood while restoring the top coat of clear finish.

In most cases, there is no need to strip the finish unless paint was applied and a stained and varnished finish is desired. BUT: stripping paint and refinishing is a big job. Stripping is difficult and messy. It is hard to remove all traces of paint from the wood. You also never know the condition of the wood beneath the paint. What will you find? If you really want to strip paint from kitchen cabinets for a real wood finish, I suggest you look into total replacement or refacing the cabinets.

Preparation: Dismantle

Just as with painting cabinets, you must dismantle the cabinets, removing the doors and drawers and hardware. Lay the parts on a flat surface for ease of work.

Minor Touch-Up – Don't Dismantle

One exception to my "always dismantle" rule is for a minor touch-up. As with furniture refinishing, you can touch up or patch small areas without dismantling the complete cabinet, but you must be a bit of an artist to blend the color and finish.

Surface Preparation

You can clean the surfaces with synthetic steel wool and mineral spirits. Scrub them to remove dirt, grime and surface imperfections. This scrubbing may also remove the dark, sticky stains around cabinet handles where oil from skin has damaged the clear finish.

If mineral spirits will not remove the dark stains around pulls and handles, use a stronger solvent. I suggest a furniture refinishing product such as those from Homer Formby. Many other companies also make refinishing products. These are strong solvents, and some include stripping products like methylene chloride, so be careful.

To use refinishing chemicals, scrub a 2-foot by 2-foot area of the surface with the chemical and synthetic steel wool. As you scrub, the surface of the clear finish is softened and removed. This process will also even out the color of the wood.

As you scrub with the refinisher, a puddle of blackened refinisher will accumulate and must be wiped from the surface periodically. It is a messy but very effective product. You also need eye and skin protection, and you must follow all safety precautions on the product label.

Smooth the Finish

Lucky us – once the surface is scrubbed with furniture refinisher, the surface will be smooth and free of finish imperfections. Any holes or cracks that may appear should be filled with colored wood putty after the finish coat is applied.

Final Coat, Wipe-On Oil, Varnish

I suggest applying a wipe-on oil finish as a clear top coat on refinished wood cabinets. Minwax makes Antique Oil Finish. General Finishes makes a great product called Arm-R-Seal Oil & Urethane Topcoat. A modified tung oil is also a good option. The key is that these products will stick to the existing finish and provide a durable top coat. You can apply several coats for a thicker, glossier finish.

The wipe-on finishes are applied with a rag. They are low-odor and easy to control. I suggest several thin coats. Usually you can apply additional coats after a few hours.

Want a perfectly smooth finish? After you apply the final coat, lightly brush the surface with very fine steel wool for a soft satin shine. If you want a gloss finish, apply a very thin final coat of oil. It will dry quickly and avoid the problem of dust settling on the surface to create imperfections.

Don't use polyurethane finish as a topcoat over any other finish. Polyurethane will not adhere properly to other finishes and can only be applied to bare wood. You could use an oil-based varnish – most of them will adhere to a clean surface in good condition.

HOME TIPS

Written by Tom Feiza

See Tom's book
How To Operate Your Home
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for great information
on "operating" a home.

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Tom Feiza, "Mr. Fix-It," Inc.