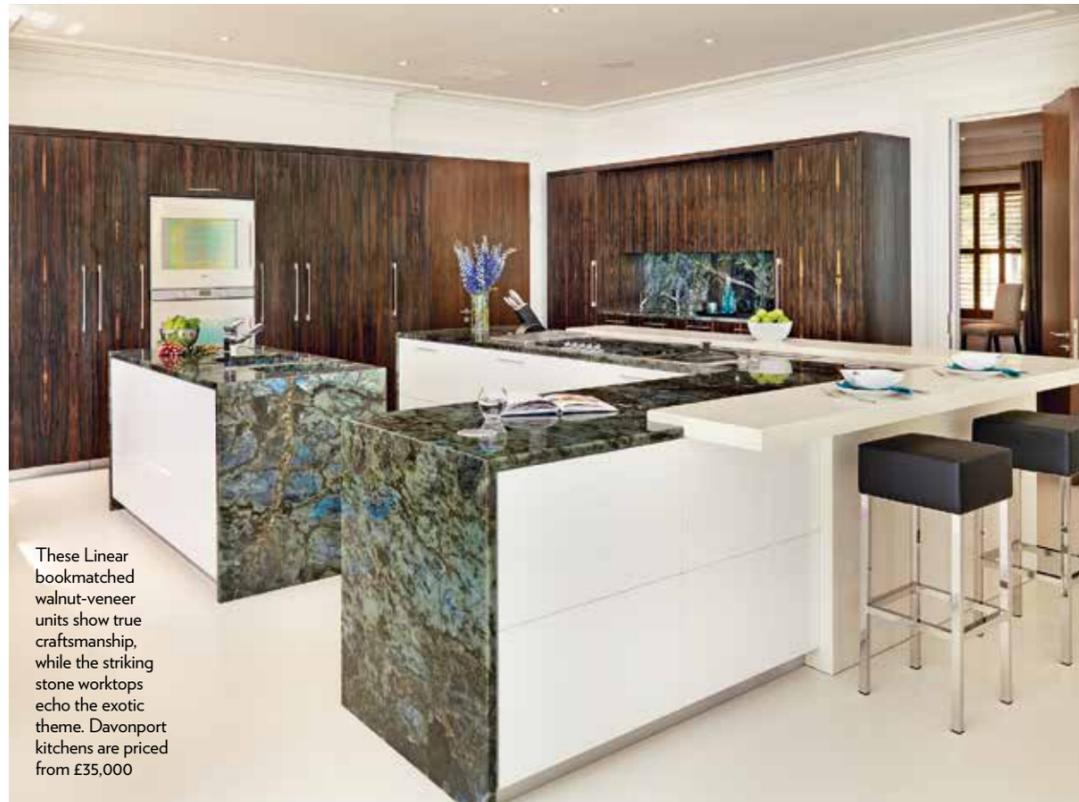


PLAN... *a bespoke kitchen will result in limitless design potential, unique personal touches and a quality construction that's built to last*



These Linear bookmatched walnut-veneered units show true craftsmanship, while the striking stone worktops echo the exotic theme. Davonport kitchens are priced from £35,000

Commissioning a custom-made kitchen offers the opportunity to exercise your creative flair and will result in a kitchen designed to suit your home, style and cooking needs.

The benefits of bespoke are numerous. Your design will be unique to you; have no constraints on the size or shape of cabinetry; make use of every inch of space; and work in harmony with architectural elements in your home. The bespoke route is a boon for those faced with unusual structural

challenges, such as uneven walls, inglenooks or low-slung windows. Where a mass-produced cabinet will do the job but can appear vaguely incongruous, a bespoke design can be curved, shaped and moulded so that the architectural irregularity becomes a feature. 'The pros to a genuinely bespoke design are simple but crucial,' says Jane Stewart, design director at Mowlem & Co. 'They include quality of manufacture, almost unlimited choice, custom specification, attention to detail and a great after-sales service.'



WHAT IS BESPOKE?

Since the word bespoke has connotations of quality, craftsmanship and solidity, it's not surprising that it has become overused – and even misused – in recent years. Genuinely bespoke kitchen companies are loosely split into two schools. First, there's the fine furniture company that can create cabinetry in any shape or size but sticks to a portfolio of ranges. This is the most popular bespoke scenario, partly because it often helps to have a set of designs to use as a starting point. It's generally more time-saving and cost-effective, but your

units won't be 100 per cent unique. Don't be put off by cabinetmakers that have set ranges, such as Plain English, Chalon and Smallbone of Devises, as they'll usually create something one-off for the right price. Then there's the truly bespoke kitchen, designed and built from scratch by fine furniture companies, usually in their own workshops (try Artichoke, Cue & Co, Johnny Grey and Chamber Furniture). These designs are also often available via architects and interior designers who commission specialists to realise their innovative ideas.

The sweeping island mimics the rooflight above in this Modern, bespoke scheme by Woodstock Furniture. Meanwhile, Smoked Oak-veneered cabinets, turquoise accents and brown Corian worktops create a distinctive look. Kitchens from £30,000



Bespoke furniture is the ideal choice for rooms with architectural peculiarities, such as unusually high ceilings, as demonstrated in this scheme featuring the Thurloe Collection by Matrix Kitchens. Prices start from £30,000

LOOK OUT FOR

Not all bespoke kitchens have the same build quality so it's important to pay attention to the details when viewing showroom displays or previous clients' kitchens. Ask these questions when buying:

Are the spaces around each door and drawer front even?

This shows that the furniture has been made and fitted accurately; gaps shouldn't be more than a few millimetres.

Do the doors and drawers close smoothly and securely?

It's important to consider the integrity of hidden mechanisms and interior constructions, as well as the overall look.

Are the main materials sourced sustainably?

Quiz the designer/cabinet maker and don't be afraid to cross-reference responses.

Does the company have genuine bespoke abilities?

One way to check is to ask if it can make you something that isn't in the brochure. If it can't, then you might be dealing with an off-the-peg company instead.



Martin Moore's bespoke Modernist kitchen is inspired by early 20th-century design. It blends wide horizontal panels, curved details, and painted and walnut finishes with a striking marble splashback for an individual look

DESIGN DIRECTION

A good bespoke kitchen company has the technical skills to create truly individual pieces. Ideally with its own workshops, or a strong relationship with a fine furniture maker, the company can offer curved cabinets, intricate inlays, hand-carved corncicing and match architectural details. Beyond that, you'll be paying for the design experience and talent of an established firm, and this shouldn't be undervalued. A skilled designer can turn the fortunes of a dark, uninspiring space and come up with ideas and solutions that you may never have considered. Of course, top-quality designers are not exclusive to the bespoke industry, but it does tend to attract an exceptionally high calibre of talent. 'A bespoke designer will have the resources to locate any specific material you may request, while off-the-peg kitchen designers are frequently limited to a set selection of options,' adds Nicholas Goldman, Managing Director of Goldman & Rankin. 'Whether it's a shagreen lining for the drawers or a concealed storage area for your wine, nothing should be beyond the realms of a bespoke designer.' Some of the higher-end companies – for example, Mark Wilkinson, Clive Christian and Halstock, to name just a few – will go to

great lengths to achieve perfection, and will experiment with many different options in order to create the seemingly impossible.

THE SERVICE

Buying bespoke naturally costs more than a mass-produced kitchen but you can expect impressive service levels in return, often including project management throughout the installation and a full snagging service to correct any problems at the end, as standard. The furniture itself should also come with a lengthy (even lifelong) guarantee. When commissioning a bespoke kitchen you'll need to dedicate more time and energy than for an off-the-peg scheme, to ensure you get the very best results. It's important that your designer (rather than a salesperson) visits your home, not only to measure up but also to get a feel for the place. You should expect at least two further meetings, plus phone calls and emails, to finalise both the overall design and the finer details. Drawings will be presented in CAD format or hand-drawn, often with the addition of material samples and recommendations for fabrics and furnishings to complete the wider space. Many companies will also send out a surveyor

to ensure everything will fit and that the site is up to the job. Some cast-iron range cookers might require floor strengthening, for instance. Plastering walls can also reduce the room dimensions by millimetres, which can be a disaster when furniture is made to fit with precision.

BUILD QUALITY

The levels of handcraftsmanship involved in a bespoke kitchen has dwindled in recent years, simply because the accuracy and speed achievable with modern machinery has replaced many hand tools. However, while you can't expect every joint to be handmade, a bespoke kitchen requires high levels of human involvement – including any intricate mouldings or detailing, individually constructed components, plus fine sanding to achieve a beautiful finish. Many companies use modern hinge mechanisms such as soft-close drawer slides, which can't be constructed using traditional methods. Make sure these components are high quality and the drawers themselves are individually made rather than outsourced. Features that many people associate with bespoke furniture include in-frame construction, which takes longer to make

than sit-on doors and provides a solid look. Carcasses will be of rigid construction and made from a solid, durable material on all sides, connected with biscuit joints or similar – also look out for dovetail, mortise and tenon joints. 'By investing in high-quality materials and construction, your kitchen will age well,' says Adrian Stoneham, MD, Stoneham Kitchens. 'Ultimately, a bespoke kitchen will add value to your property, and is therefore a worthwhile long-term investment.'

WORTH THE WAIT?

Buying bespoke is never a quick-fix solution, a skilled designer will spend a lot of time talking through your precise requirements and a complex design can take weeks of fine-tuning to achieve. 'Every element needs its own drawing, whether it be the floor plan, corner cabinetry or positioning of appliances. It can take time to get just right, but that's the fun part of designing a kitchen from scratch – there's so much flexibility to adapt and add to the design throughout the process,' says Jon King, founder and principle designer at Hamilton King. You must also be prepared to wait for at least six weeks for your furniture to be made – usually longer. The best ►



A truly bespoke contemporary handleless design in a hi-gloss white finish by Chamber Furniture. Kitchens start from £40,000

A BESPOKE KITCHEN DESIGN GIVES YOU THE FREEDOM TO EXPRESS YOUR INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY

Designer ranges

Off-the-peg is usually the more affordable option but avoid those at rock-bottom prices. It's always worth paying a little extra for an extended choice of cabinet sizes and a quality finish, especially if you're aiming to mimic a bespoke look. And off-the-peg doesn't equal cheap. High-end designer ranges have a premium price tag but you can rest assured the investment is in the product design, materials and finish.



companies will be in hot demand, so don't expect them to schedule your kitchen in right away. Then there's the price. There's no escaping the fact that a bespoke kitchen comes at a premium, and you will need to set aside between £25,000-£40,000 for a medium-size space. For a more competitive rate it's worth contacting smaller or family-run outfits, and remember you can always ask your designer about ways to scale down the budget without compromising quality. For instance, reducing the fiddly, labour-intensive features, choosing cupboards rather than drawers, and postponing an elaborate larder unit until more funds are available.

GET THE BESPOKE LOOK 'OFF THE PEG'

If your budget simply won't stretch to bespoke, or your taste is simple and the space is straightforward, there are now many very good solutions available from off-the-peg manufacturers. Indeed, some companies are deliberately targeting the bespoke market by producing furniture collections of exceptional quality and style, without the haute-couture price tag (see PWS' 1909 brand and English Revival from Mereway Kitchens). 'Off the peg' refers to any kitchen that's mass-produced to

standard sizes in a set choice of colours and finishes. Some manufacturers carry stock of each permutation, allowing you to install a kitchen the same day as you buy it. More frequently, manufacturers now work to the 'just in time' principle, which means they make kitchens very speedily using the latest production-line methods, when it's ordered. This solution allows companies to offer a far wider selection, often hundreds of cabinet permutations in each range, without having to warehouse volumes of furniture that may not sell. Since the level of choice is virtually limitless, these companies can achieve a very close standard of fit and uniqueness to that of bespoke makers. 'The criticism often directed at off-the-peg products is that they lack the individuality that you can get from bespoke. However, there's an abundance of variety and it's more about having the inclination to use this choice to create something interesting and original,' argues Robert Clark, Managing Director, Kitchen Door Workshop.

OTHER OPTIONS

In recent years, a few bespoke manufacturers have expanded their offerings with a more limited off-the-peg portfolio that's aimed at those

who can't afford genuine bespoke but still want the look of the custom-made furniture. British Standard by Plain English and Murray & Murray's Off the Peg range are two such options. Sold on a supply-only basis, the cabinets offer similar quality and construction to the company's bespoke product but without extras such as fitting, expert advice and customer service. 'Good craftsmanship shouldn't be the preserve of those with money,' says Katie Fontana, creative director of Plain English. 'It was this gap between the affordability and accessibility of off-the-peg ranges and the quality of bespoke cupboards, that prompted me to create British Standard. Buying off-the-peg enables customers to take control of their own project and ensure the kitchen they buy is properly made and will age well.' It's paramount to commission a talented designer, who can come up with clever ideas and solutions, and an experienced installer, who can use intricate scribing techniques to achieve the best fit. 'By choosing a kitchen range with plenty of design scope and flexibility, or even combining off-the-peg units with a bespoke feature piece, a good designer will allow you to achieve a dream kitchen that's individually designed, if not entirely individually made,' says Barry Abrahams, MD, Wilson Fink. **UK**

Unusual material combinations are the speciality of Holloways of Ludlow. Here, the island features drawers clad in mitre-edged Silt Corian, while the acrylic strips on the walnut wall units behind allow the interior lighting to shine through. Bespoke kitchens start from £25,000

KEY CONTACTS

- ARTICHOKE 01934 745270, artichoke-ltd.com
- CHALON 01458 254600, chalon.com
- CHAMBER FURNITURE 01959 532553, chamberfurniture.co.uk
- CHARLES YORKE 01623 756080, charlesyorke.com
- CHISELWOOD 01522 704446, chiselwood.co.uk
- CLIVE CHRISTIAN 020 349 9200, clive.com
- COTTESWOOD 01608 641858, cotteswood.co.uk
- DAVONPORT 0845 486 0025, davonport.com
- FIGURA 01428 686500, figura.co.uk
- HALSTOCK 01935 891762, halstock.com
- JOHNNY GREY 01730 821424, johnnygrey.com
- MARK WILKINSON FURNITURE 01380 850007, mwf.com
- MARTIN MOORE & CO 0845 180 0015, martinmoore.com
- MOWLEM & CO 020 7610 6626, mowlemandco.co.uk
- MURRAY & MURRAY 01592 774363, murrayandmurray.co.uk
- PLAIN ENGLISH 01449 774028, plainenglishdesign.co.uk
- PODESTA 01494 677770, podesta.uk.com
- RICHARD BAKER FURNITURE 020 8336 1777, richardbakerfurniture.co.uk
- SIMON TAYLOR 01296 488207, simon-taylor.co.uk
- SMALLBONE OF DEVIZES 020 7589 5998, smallbone.co.uk
- THOMAS & THOMAS KITCHENS 01235 851144, thomasthomas.net
- TIM WOOD 08453 676799, timwood.com
- WOODSTOCK FURNITURE 020 8876 0131, woodstockfurniture.co.uk

FEATURE LINDA CLAYTON