

Cabinet Finish

On wood cabinets the finish is just as important as how well the cabinets are constructed. The finish not only provides aesthetic appeal but is a key component in the protection of the underlying wood surface. It needs that protection from the moisture and chemicals that are typical in a kitchen.

(Keep in mind we're talking about *wood* cabinets here. Cabinets covered in laminate or melamine aren't coated with these types of finishes and surface treatments.)

The amount of material to explain the science behind the varnishes, lacquers and other cabinet surface treatments could fill a book but it's not necessary for a basic understanding of cabinet construction. What we'll focus on here are some of the common finishes that you're apt to encounter in your cabinet research and their important features.

Materials

These are the most common finish treatments that you'll find on kitchen cabinets:

- **Paint** - The benefit of paint is that you have a limitless color pallet available to you. You're not limited to a range of browns and other earth tones like you are with wood stains.

"Milk Paint" is an alternative choice to the standard enamels that are used on cabinetry. It's an organic-based paint made from milk protein, lime and natural pigments. The basic 'recipe' has actually been around for hundreds of years. Milk paint's benefits include it's good durability and strong resistance to water. It also adheres well to wood. It has it's own unique decorative appeal and is reminiscent of the texture of paints used on antique and period furniture.

- **Stain** - Wood stain is a topical color treatment that alters the natural color of the underlying wood while allowing the grain pattern to show through. Wood stain requires a sealer on top of it for protection.
- **Varnish** - Varnish is a combination of oil and resin that's used to provide a protective layer over the wood and any other surface treatment like stain.

One of the finishing terms you'll probably encounter more often than not is "catalyzed varnish". It sounds high tech and in some respects it is. In more simple terms it defines a type of finish that uses a "catalyst" to cause or speed up a particular reaction between the chemicals in the finish, usually to achieve some specific result. Catalyzed varnish incorporates compounds that make it harder and more durable than it would be without them.

- **Lacquer** - Lacquer is another top-coat protective sealer used on cabinets and furniture. It's made by dissolving a resin in a solvent. It too can be "catalyzed" and you'll see references to "catalyzed lacquer" in various cabinet.
- **Glaze** - Glaze is a pigmented but transparent or semi-transparent coating that's applied over a base coating such as paint or stain. Glaze is used to enhance the look of cabinets by highlighting the underlying base color and bringing out surface detail. When glaze is applied and then hand wiped some of the glaze remains in the corners and recesses of doors, providing additional visual highlights.

The Finishing Process

The cabinet finishing process is dependent on the type of finishes used and the individual cabinet maker's capabilities and formula. Large cabinet manufacturers may have

sophisticated facilities and processes to apply the finish whereas smaller cabinet makers may take a simpler approach or even farm out the finishing process to a local firm that specializes in that type of work.

Wood cabinet finishing involves a number of steps that involve preparing the wood, applying the surface treatments and baking the finish. Larger cabinet makers may have the resources and advanced production capabilities to produce consistent quality finishes. Smaller shops may not have the same capabilities. One of the things on your checklist when researching smaller cabinet shops should be their finishing process. Achieving a quality finish requires controlled conditions free from airborne dirt and dust. Some finishes require baking to cure. That's not to say that high-tech production facilities are the only way to achieve a quality finish. Just be sure you understand your cabinet maker's finishing capabilities and whether they'll produce a product that will hold up to the rigors of the kitchen environment.

One final point to remember is that the finish options you choose have a bearing on the final cost of your cabinets. Finishes that include hand-rubbed treatments or multi-step coating applications take time and ultimately raise the cost of the cabinets. Glazing can produce some nice effects but it's an additional step in the process. Ask yourself whether it's absolutely essential in your kitchen style. Otherwise you may be able to save some money on simpler finish treatments.