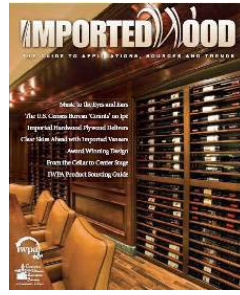


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KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL: CABINET MEETINGS & COUNTER INTELLIGENCE

Kitchen Design Heightens Use of Imported Woods

It is often said the kitchen is the heart of the home. Certainly, based on overall remodeling expenditures in the United States, the kitchen is the heart of the matter as this area of the home is the most frequently remodeled. Homeowners spend upwards of \$26,000 on average to upgrade existing kitchen space, according to data from the National

Kitchen & Bath Association. Even in new construction, the kitchen ranks as a top investment – a priority for homeowners seeking to create their dream spaces.

Cabinets and countertops are cornerstones of kitchen design, and now more than ever, imported woods are playing a vital role in making these kitchen essentials something extra special. As homeowners today increasingly perceive the kitchen as true centerpieces and masterpieces of their homes, they are going custom – seeking more unique, prestigious elements to create high end looks. Imported woods are excellent contrasts to stainless steel appliances and surfaces, softening the overall look with timeless appeal.

Cabinets are typically the most expensive aspects of any kitchen design, and expenditures indicate that homeowners are willing to invest in custom options to achieve their dreams. Wood cabinets are still perceived to be the superior choices, and consumers are increasingly particular regarding the selection of imported woods. Cabinet shops small and large report a strong trend toward the use of imported woods.

Mertins Cabinet Shop is a 19-person business in the Midwest providing custom cabinetry for discerning clientele. Though it may be a small shop, Mertins is well versed in understanding – and using – imported wood. Their high quality cabinet and interior trim work is so respected that they only generate business on a referral basis, and they get plenty of it. Mertins' designs are found in homes ranging from \$500,000 to \$5,000,000.

Rodger Dettmann, Director of Purchasing for Mertins, is personally responsible for the sourcing and selecting of hardwood, softwood, and plywood for the company.

“We use a lot of Brazilian cherry and African mahogany, and for customers who want a lighter look, we’ll source birch from northern Europe, Russia, and Canada. We will seldom use stains, but prefer to use natural finishes that bring out the beauty of the species,” Dettmann states.

Today’s consumer is much more design savvy than in past eras. Thanks to extensive home design television programming, home product retailers, the Internet, and print media, homeowners are more educated regarding design options and products. Thus, they are becoming more sophisticated in terms of imported wood selection for their cabinets.

Dettmann explains, “The use of imported species is on the rise as the consumer becomes more aware of the unique qualities these species offer – grain pattern, color, durability, etc. It’s not just an oak and maple world anymore.”

As clientele demands imported woods in growing numbers, cabinetmakers are finding ways to guide consumers to select wood based on their desired designs and performance needs.

“Even though we produce very high-end products, we still recognize that solids are not always the best products for specific applications,” says Dettmann.

In addition to cabinet facings, shops such as Mertins assess how to best build cabinet boxes, blending the imported and domestic woods to achieve the best strength and performance.

“We’ll use a great deal of imported plywood for our cabinet boxes because the quality and consistency is superb. Plus, it is readily available and a good value. Baltic birch is one of our favorites because it machines well, particularly for dovetailing. Technically it is a hardwood plywood product, but it is lighter in weight, making it easier for fabrication and installation. It is available in a wide range of thicknesses, and when we step up to a thicker product, weight does not become a factor.”

Capital Cabinet, a division of Masterbrand Cabinets, Inc. (the nation’s second largest cabinet corporation), is a company with a 60-year history in the art of cabinet craftsmanship. Headquartered in Las Vegas and servicing clientele in Nevada, California, Utah, and Arizona, Capital is equipped for both volume jobs and individualized needs.

Capital has evolved with trends throughout its long history, keeping up with changing styles and wood preferences. Within the last year, Capital clients have shown a strong interest in imported woods, specifically European beech.

According to Capital Purchasing Manager Randy Miller, the demand for beech began in the southern California market. While domestic beech didn’t hit the mark in terms of look and tightness of grain, the European beech had great appeal – just what customers wanted. The popularity has grown beyond the California market, gaining momentum in the Las Vegas area as well.

“In less than a year, beech is representing 30 percent of our sales,” Miller reports. “It began at just 3 to 4 percent.”

Miller states that the company had anticipated the addition of beech to cannibalize the sales of red oak. Instead, the beech has equally pulled from sales of red oak and maple, proving it to be a strong alternative to both species. The beech is used in doors, cabinet facings, mouldings, frames, and accessories.

Though cabinetmakers know wood from the inside out, in terms of cabinet construction and performance, clients still focus on the overall beauty of the finished installation. The unique looks of imported wood – the styles, finishes, and details – are ultimately what drives clients to not only make selections but to be satisfied with their cabinets in the long term and make those all-important referrals to friends and family.

As more consumers go custom in the kitchen, the popularity of wood countertops are also a trend on the rise in kitchens, receiving positive word-of-mouth praise from a burgeoning legion of satisfied homeowners. Today, wood is extending beyond the traditional butcher block to be used throughout the kitchen – especially islands and eating areas in the form of high-end custom countertops.

Craft-Art Company in Atlanta, Georgia, is a new leader in the wood countertop trend. The company procures fine woods – approximately 35 percent imported – to craft unique, stylish countertops. Ken Williamson founded Craft-Art in 1998 in the basement of his home. The venture began simply with Williamson crafting custom cutting boards and butcher blocks. Along the way he developed a moisture-, heat-, and stain-proof varnish that requires minimal maintenance, and that opened the door for bigger applications. With Williamson’s special varnish, the wood does not split or mildew and only needs to be oiled every 15 to 18 months to be maintained. Thus, Craft-Art countertops were born.

Craft-Art's business has quickly blossomed because the company fills a unique niche in the United States kitchen design industry. Craft-Art is all but creating the wood countertop category in the United States, and business reflects the demand in the marketplace. As there are more affluent homeowners seeking high-end materials for their kitchens, there is a great interest in wood countertops.

"Imported woods are very popular for our countertops," says Williamson. "For our clientele, the unique looks of imported wood just can't be beat."



Williamson adds that the kitchen and bath industry is always seeking the next 'new thing,' and imported wood countertops certainly fit the bill. As granite and other surfacing options grow in popularity, homeowners are drawn to the look of wood to create contrast and complement other surfacing choices.

The design palette of these discriminating homeowners certainly includes a taste for imported woods. Popular species for Craft-Art include tigerwood, zebrawood, teak, and bubinga. Brazilian cherry is also popular. All lumber is hand selected and matched to highlight grain, color, and texture. Tops are available in plank and edge-grain style using full-length boards, or end-grain style, which creates a checkerboard-type pattern. With more than 30 standard-edge profiles offered as well as full custom profiles, there are a limitless number of design options.

Not only do the imported woods have the look clients are seeking, they offer the right density and durability need for use in kitchens. Countertops can be from 1 1/4 to 6 inches in thickness, which not only looks impressive but gives substantial performance.

Williamson explains, "Tigerwood is one of our most popular products. The wood is an orange-brown tone with black streaks, which shows lots of movement. It comes from South America, where it is used as a construction timber. Its density and strength – along with its great look – make for excellent countertop material."

The market is welcoming these unique countertops, as Craft-Art's growth as a company pays testimony. What started as a two-person operation in the Williamson family basement has burgeoned into a 33,000 square foot facility employing 35 people. Craft-Art produces approximately 300 tops a month, has a network of 312 displaying dealers, and is poised for a bright future.

As the kitchen design industry grows in the future, consumers' love of imported wood will continue to be closely aligned. The warmth, the personality, the prestige, and the quality: wood is beloved in the hearts – and in the kitchens – of American homeowners.



IMPORTED WOODS HELP MANUFACTURE A DREAM COME TRUE

MY, HOW THINGS CHANGE...

The manufactured housing industry is welcoming new life in a modern era. As design trends, building demands, and market influences converge, this industry is on the upswing as it evolves to meet today's housing climate with transformed styles, options, and efficiencies.

Today's manufactured homes don't carry the 'assembly line' style of eras gone by. Now these factory-built homes are being created to replicate the styles, architecture, and details found in traditional site-built homes.

"The manufactured and modular housing industry is going through major evolutions, including the addition of more high-end homes to serve growing market demand. The industry has now started branching off into multi-family housing, such as townhouses constructed in factories and assembled onsite," reports Chris Stinebert, President of the Manufactured Housing Institute (MHI), in Arlington, Virginia.

Not surprisingly, imported hardwood plywood is increasingly used in the construction of manufactured homes. Imported plywood is often an unseen material in manufactured housing, selected for its high strength, light weight, and smoothness which allow the manufacturer to easily laminate paper or vinyl to meet any customer's design need.



Imports complement the work at hand for U.S. manufacturers of factory-built homes. The cost savings and versatility of these products are gateways to bringing in more diverse design elements and materials.

"There is a huge movement within the industry to build homes that look like traditional residential homes, with features such as pitched roofs, gabled entries, dormers, large banks of windows, etc., that make the manufactured home compatible with almost any neighborhood style," Stinebert explains.

"Interiors feature open floor plans that adapt more readily to a family's active lifestyle. There's a greater concentration on providing all amenities you would find in a traditional site-built home, such as state-of-the-art kitchens, home entertainment centers, and luxurious baths in master suites. Pretty much what's happening in housing is also happening in manufactured and modular homes."

This trend towards merging design styles of modular and traditional residential construction is expanding the use of imported woods throughout these manufactured homes. From underlayment in flooring or in solid components such as mouldings, imports are cost effective yet compromise no standards in terms of specifications. Luan and meranti hardwood plywood are common elements of factory-built homes, as are softwood lumber and softwood panels, which are showing up more and more as designs advance.



Today, more of these homes are also using wood in the exterior. In the past, vinyl siding or other types of siding typically viewed as less aesthetically appealing were commonly used.

Approximately two of every ten new home starts in the U.S. are manufactured homes, and nearly 75 percent of those factory-built homes are multi-sectioned. These designs are providing more square footage, porches, vaulted ceilings, and other details

once reserved for traditional site-built homes.

Quality and design are continuously improving, making manufactured homes more structurally comparable to site-built construction. However, the affordability of manufactured homes is still superior because of the ability of U.S. manufacturers to use imported hardwood plywood and other imported wood products. These homes are many times first-homes to a demographic segment that would otherwise continue renting. In many areas of the country, exorbitant home prices and rising interest rates are beckoning even broader segments of the population to seek more affordable housing alternatives.

Stinebert summarizes the connection between the imported wood industry and manufactured housing, “With more and more focus within the manufactured housing industry on providing amenities in our homes, there’s the natural synergy you would find with other forms of housing, such as counters, cabinets, entertainment centers, and so on. The industry has gone through the paradigm shift, and this opens the door to a lot more upscale amenities where this synergy comes to bear.”

MANUFACTURED HOMES & HURRICANE KATRINA RELIEF

IMMEDIATE HOUSING FOR IMMEDIATE NEEDS

After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the Manufactured Housing Institute (MHI) worked in tandem with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to access and provide factory-built homes for displaced citizens. The flexibility and immediacy of manufactured homes made them an ideal alternative for giving shelter to those in need.

“The manufactured housing industry rallied for the cause,” says Bruce Savage, Vice President of Public Affairs for MHI. “Manufactured homes provided comfort and livability to people whose homes had been destroyed following Katrina.” “We came together to provide approximately 24,000 ‘temporary FEMA units’ to house displaced families in these smaller, stripped-down units,” Savage says. “However, the industry also wanted to show how it could step in on the longer-term rebuilding of the Gulf Coast.”

To that end, MHI established “The Gulf Coast Housing Initiative: Factory Building The American Dream” to show how today’s manufactured and modular homes can provide the answer to the overwhelming demand for housing in the Gulf Coast region. Imported hardwood plywood gives the manufactured housing industry the capacity to quickly respond to emergencies.

“Our various manufacturers are working hard with local developers and public officials to bring new homes to devastated communities throughout the area,” Savage states. “We continue to participate in state and regional efforts to show how factory-built homes can provide quality housing in a timely manner for the region.” Manufactured housing – and the use of imported hardwood plywood – is making dreams come true affordably and beautifully. Necessity is the mother of invention, and as housing needs are evolving on U.S. soil, the manufactured housing industry is inventing improved opportunities for more people to own their own home-sweet-homes.