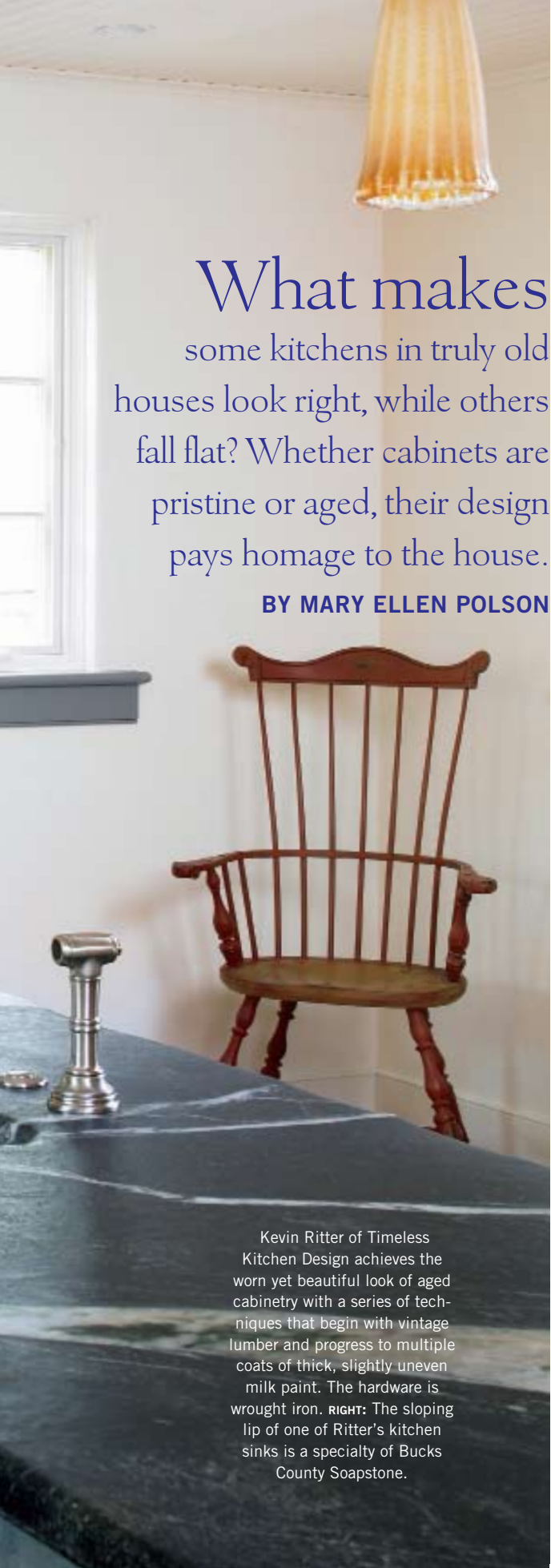


*A Kitchen*  
**Worthy of**  
*the House*



What makes  
some kitchens in truly old  
houses look right, while others  
fall flat? Whether cabinets are  
pristine or aged, their design  
pays homage to the house.

BY MARY ELLEN POLSON

Kevin Ritter of Timeless Kitchen Design achieves the worn yet beautiful look of aged cabinetry with a series of techniques that begin with vintage lumber and progress to multiple coats of thick, slightly uneven milk paint. The hardware is wrought iron. **RIGHT:** The sloping lip of one of Ritter's kitchen sinks is a specialty of Bucks County Soapstone.



**T**HERE ARE AT LEAST TWO schools of thought regarding cabinets for early American kitchens. Both of these schools draw inspiration from antiques, period mouldings, and other details from 18th- and early-19th-century homes. Both are made with mortise-and-tenon joinery, furniture-quality finishes, and trimmed with hand-turned wood, reproduction brass, or wrought-iron hardware. In appearance, however, the difference can be startling: One school favors clean and new, and the other prefers aged cupboards that look as if they have seen the wear of 200 years.

On the “new” side are companies that include Kennebec Co., one of the pioneers of period kitchens; Crown Point Cabinetry, whose cabinets span three American centuries; and D.R. Dimes, a company known both for its fine reproduction 18th-century furniture and its tiger maple cabinetry. “Our furniture is handmade to look like the piece would have looked 225 years ago,” says Douglas P. Dimes, the company’s president and chief designer.

One of the secrets to producing that just-new centuries old effect is the use of traditional woodworking methods, like hand-turning wood cabinet pulls. Kennebec’s Jim Peavey notes that the paneled surfaces of a recent Georgian-inspired kitchen are hand planed, “the way it would have been done in the early 1800s.”



## CABINET checklist

Here are a few of the key characteristics to look for in choosing cabinetry for an early home:

- Handmade appearance
- Traditional mortise-and-tenon joinery
- Durable, furniture-quality finish (new or aged)
- Placement: cabinets built so the face is flush to the wall, limited use of upper cabinets, varied cabinet heights
- Traditional materials on the counters, especially soapstone



## sources

### PERIOD KITCHEN CABINETMAKERS

- **Benner's Woodworking** (513) 897-9000, bennerswoodworking.com
- **Cook & Cook Cabinetry** (207) 885-0767, cookandcookcabinetry.com
- **Country Road Associates** (845) 677-6041, countryroadassociates.com
- **Crown Point Cabinetry** (800) 999-4994, crown-point.com
- **Deschenes & Cooper** (860) 599-2481, expertmillwork.com
- **D.R. Dimes** (603) 942-8050, drdimes.com
- **Eldred Wheeler** (800) 779-5310, eldredwheeler.com
- **Imperia Custom Cabinetry** (508) 894-3000, imperiacabinet.com
- **Kennebec Company** (207) 443-2131, kennebeccompany.com
- **New England Country Custom Interiors** (585) 315-9068, newenglandcountry.net
- **Olde Glory Shops** (513) 897-4718, oldegloryshops.com

- **Post & Beam Period Home Furnishings** (309) 726-2662, postandbeamperiod.com
- **Quality Custom Cabinetry** (800) 909-6006, qcc.com
- **Silver Light Editions** (610) 593-0444, silverlighteditions.com
- **Timeless Kitchen Design** (610) 296-2775, timelesskitchendesign.net
- **Vintage Kitchens** (800) 832-6251, vintagekitchens.com

### STONE COUNTERTOPS

- **Alberene Soapstone Co.** (866) 831-5100, alberenesoapstone.com
- **Bucks County Soapstone Co.** (215) 249-8181, buckscountysoapstone.com
- **Green Mountain Soapstone** (800) 585-5636, greenmountainsoapstone.com
- **M. Teixeira Soapstone** (877) 478-8170, soapstones.com
- **Sheldon Slate Products** (207) 997-3615, sheldonslate.com
- **Vermont Soapstone** (802) 263-5404, vermontsoapstone.com

D.R. Dimes aims for kitchen cabinetry that is more refined in its fit and finish, like furniture suited to a 250-year-old brick Federal rather than a simple Cape. “The exteriors look like early American furniture,” Dimes says. That’s partly because the finishes are the same used on fine furniture; Dimes estimates that 40 percent of the effort put into his cabinets goes into the creation of the finish.

Similarly, Crown Point uses multiple coats of milk paint on its trademark cabinetry, each one sanded before the next is applied. The finish is sealed with a low-sheen sealer and varnish.

Dimes often minimizes the number of upper cabinets in his kitchens, to make them feel more of the period. Dimes also uses period ideas to solve design problems. In one instance, a client wanted a built-in cabinet, but there wasn’t enough clearance to place one against a wall. So Dimes adapted a Shaker technique: he recessed the cabinet, leaving the cabinet face flush with the wall.

As for the “aged” school of thought, one proponent is Kevin Ritter of Timeless Kitchen Design. Like Dimes, Ritter also comes from a family furniture-making tradition; in his case, his cabinets are inspired by antique pieces with painted, distressed finishes created by Bryce M. Ritter & Son. Most colonial furniture was not made by master cabinetmakers. “It was thrown together in the wintertime by a farmer who needed a piece of furniture,” he says. “We straddle the line between something that might have been

**ABOVE:** Existing wear marks in antique pine boards selected for a kitchen table add to the charm of a kitchen for a stone house in Pennsylvania from Timeless Kitchen Design. **RIGHT:** Mike and Chris Benner apply years of experience in the making of 18th- and 19th-century reproduction furniture to their kitchen designs.



**ABOVE:** A window seat in a Connecticut kitchen, designed in clear pine by Crown Point Cabinetry, features a beaded inset and forged European-style pulls.



**LEFT:** Authentic details like hand-turned wood cabinet pulls and a slope-front soapstone sink bring authenticity to pantry in a historic Maine house, made by Kennebec Company. **ABOVE:** A reproduction hutch with beaded inset from Crown Point Cabinetry is finished with Old Fashioned Milk Paint Co.'s 'Soldier Blue'.

in the original house and what the modern customer wants.”

Ritter, an advocate of re-using materials, begins with antique wood for all the front-face doors and drawers. The old wood gives him a head start on creating his signature aged appearance. He also uses antique glass because it looks more authentic. “We prefer that to reproduction glass,” he says. “First of all, it’s cheaper. I also think a lot of the seeded reproduction glass just doesn’t look like old glass.”

Part of the artfulness of his cabinets is in the finish: the idea is to re-create the appearance of many layers of crusty paint. Milk paint is the perfect medium. Not only is it authentic, but also it bonds to the wood and is difficult to remove. “We mix it up so it’s a little bit chunky, uneven,” he says. “That goes back to the way the old pieces looked.”

Since milk paint is porous he uses a sealer: either a contemporary clear coat finish for high-use areas, or a beeswax paste for more protected areas.

The worn, scooped-out front on some of Ritter’s soapstone sink installations is actually a specialty of Bucks County Soapstone. The pattern is cut by hand, using water-jet technology. The fabricator also does something called a Franklin edge near the corners. “You can cut edges with any kind of machinery,” Ritter says, “but, since it’s done by hand, it’s uneven. It’s an undulating, antique surface. I think it adds to the authentic look of the kitchen.” \*