



Maurice Koetsier's kitchen in Listowel showcases Heirlooms Custom Cabinetry and Furniture's elegant creations.

# Shelf *life*

*As owners of Heirlooms,  
Heather and Dwayne  
Brubacher are creating  
a legacy of stylish  
cabinetry and furniture  
customized to their clients'  
lifestyles and dreams*

BY JULES TORTI

PHOTOGRAPHY • JESSE BRENNEMAN

**A QUICK** prowling on any real estate site reveals one of two outcomes: A home for sale in desperate need of a kitchen and bathroom gut, or a sage seller who has already attended to the obvious with a tricked-out chef's kitchen and spa-like ensuite.

Then there are those reality shows that thrive on convincing timid buyers that dated tiles and cabinets are merely cosmetic issues that can be resolved with cheap, quick-fix cabinetry and peel-and-stick backsplash makeovers.

Despite all this, there is a supportive niche population demanding custom work. These homeowners have found their dream "forever" home or are taking desperate measures to transform their current homes into





Listowel homeowner Maurice Koetsier was impressed with Heirlooms' ability to create exactly what he wanted.

one by choosing stately, classic options.

It's where companies like Heirlooms Custom Cabinetry and Furniture come in. Located in North Perth, it has expanded from its humble start in 1996 to cater to a clientele seeking a contemporary look without sacrificing the history of a century home, stone cottage or generational farmhouse.

For owners Heather and Dwayne Brubacher, an innate talent for woodworking and a desire to operate their own business led them along a meandering path to cabinetmaking.

They gained footing in the commercial sector selling wholesale to solid-wood furniture stores across Ontario. But the market was fiercely competitive and an abundance of charming Mennonite woodworking shops in the local area deterred them from continuing along that vein.

Married for 20 years, the couple has deep roots in the Millbank and Listowel area. Neither were avid birdhouse or tree house builders as children, as one might suspect with their current career. Dwayne has no formal training, but he's spent decades ankle-deep in sawdust with the hum of saws as a soundtrack to his days.

"We switched gears and started selling furniture retail and it slowly led to the venture we are in now — cabinetmaking. We still make some custom furniture but our bread-and-butter is definitely the built-in cabinets," says Heather, who wears the customer relations hat of the duo and fielded most of the questions. Dwayne is more at home in his workshop, where their designs come to life.

Though Dwayne made a few pieces of furniture with his father's tools years ago, both were surprised to find themselves headlong in the business of custom work. They have learned to move fluidly between new construction projects, loft conversions and traditional kitchen renovations.

Whether your affection is for raw, painted or stained wood, Heirlooms offers savvy solutions and styles for a myriad of design needs.

Since the late '90s, the couple has seen a growth spurt in home office design as frazzled commuters choose to work remotely in attics and finished basements. Thanks to what's become the man cave movement, they've also seen a surge in basement bar and media room conversions. But kitchens and vanities still trump all other renovation queries.

"Our designs have changed from cabinets with pocket doors to hide smaller TVs to units that are built around big screens," says Heather. "We do some home offices and definitely a lot of basement bars, but I would still say kitchens and vanities are the big thing."

Fireplace surrounds have also been upgraded as homeowners move from traditional wood-burning fireplaces to gas inserts and elaborate stonework.

"A coat of paint, stainless steel appliance upgrades and replacing light fixtures are quick fixes, but it's often the cabinet and counter choices that create the dynamic change in a room," says Heather.



**Above:** Heirlooms' Dwayne and Heather Brubacher have an innate talent for woodworking.

**Below:** Heirlooms created this bookshelf in Maurice Koetsier's living room.







**Above:** Dwayne Brubacher at home in Heirlooms' workshop where he and Heather's designs come to life.

**Far left:** Heirlooms designed the laundry room in Maurice Koetsier's home with storage and practicality in mind.

**Left:** Pre-existing structures and new installation blend seamlessly in the bathroom.

In guiding clients toward a timeless look, she feels it's essential for them to be able to determine what they like and dislike.

"If a customer is really committed to going in a direction solely based on trends, I try to encourage them to think long-term," she says. "I find most people know what they like but get swayed and distracted by what is currently popular. I try to tell them to stick with what they genuinely love because they will be happier for longer than the lifespan of a trend."

Educating the client about the pros and cons when choosing cabinets is a key part of Heather and Dwayne's projects. Not only is it essential to achieve an overall look, but the design has to function for the client as well. So beyond determining the focal point of a room, for instance, are there storage concerns? Is there a desire to hide appliances? Does the client host large family gatherings?

Couples and families with children will have differing needs. Is the kitchen or living room the hot spot for entertaining friends? Is eating takeout at the kitchen island on a bar stool a more realistic snapshot of home life? Every aspect has to be considered.

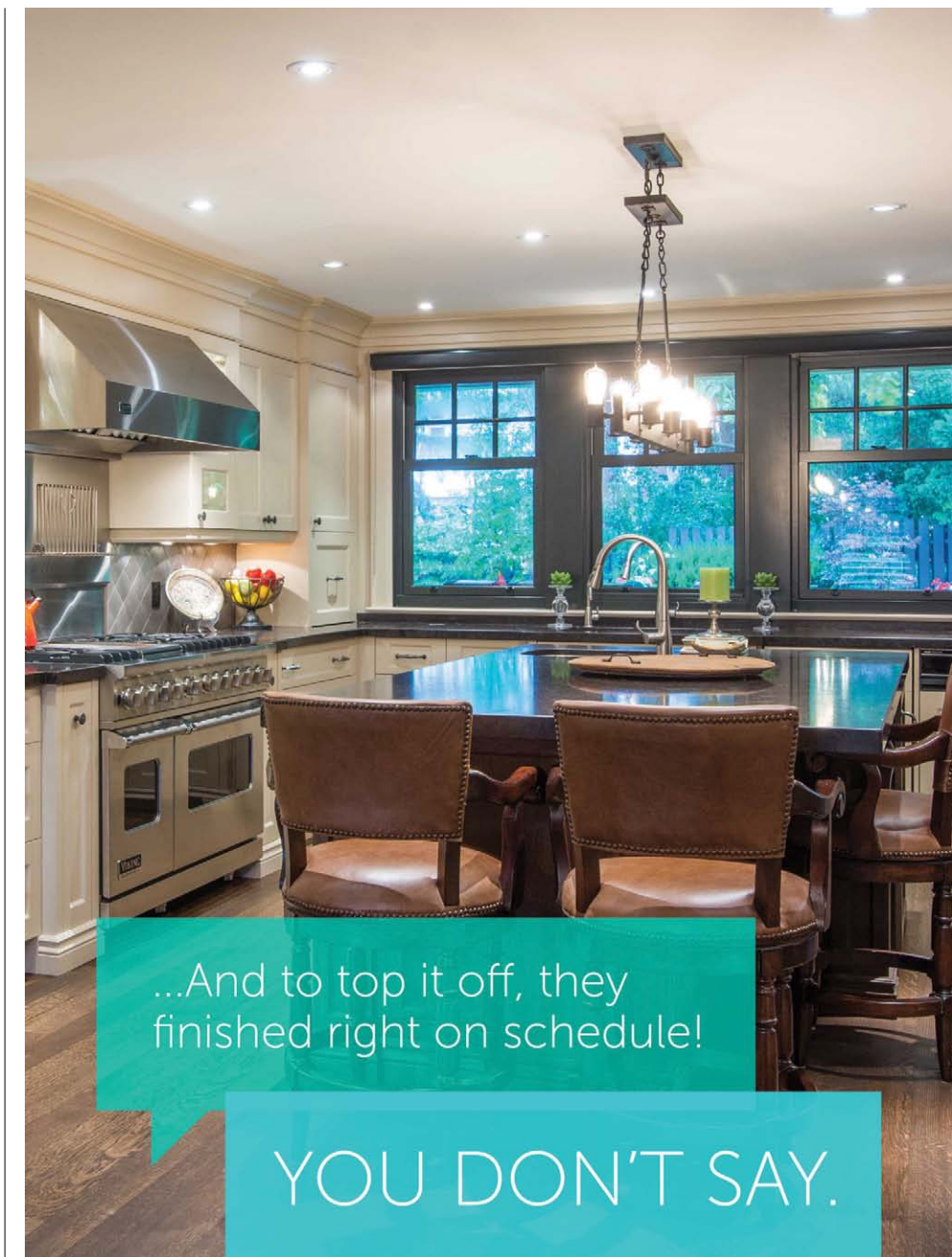
"We talk about their unique needs and tastes so we can design something that they will love in appearance but that will also address their needs from a functional-ity standpoint," says Heather.

When clients first contact Heirlooms, Dwayne and Heather often make an appointment to visit them at home. Seeing the space is the easiest way to discuss sustainable options and get accurate measurements, and then they follow up with drawings and a quote.

Once clients decide to proceed, a trip to Heirlooms' storefront and workshop allows them to choose materials that are symbiotic to the installation.

"I spend the hours upfront with the details while Dwayne builds and installs," says Heather.

Final measurements are taken and Dwayne kick-starts the production.



...And to top it off, they finished right on schedule!

YOU DON'T SAY.

## Our apologies.

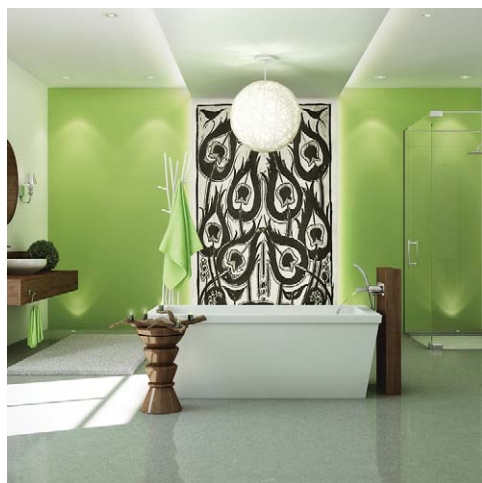
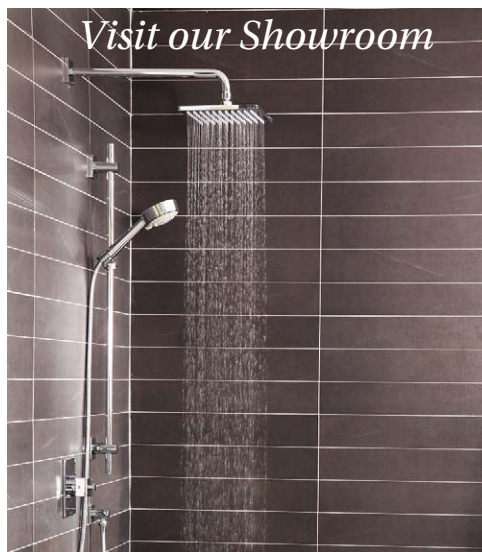
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Many customers are in a curiosity or investigation stage when they first approach Heirlooms. The company's ballpark estimates help clients to set a budget or refine a dream. Some clients are proactive with their research and send photos of their space with rough measurements or concepts from magazine clippings, or both.

Heather has found that Heirlooms' customers plan to stay in their homes long-term and aren't simply upgrading for resale. Many want a kitchen to fawn over, and demand for contemporary and traditional styles see-saws.

"We deal with a lot of painted cabinetry and maple kitchens. Both are not forgiving to work with. Oak is a very forgiving wood as it has more grain, but it's not as favoured anymore," says Heather. "White painted kitchens are still the most popular request — for their guaranteed clean lines and feel. Some clients put glaze on the wood to warm it up while others seek balance with the addition of a stained-wood island."

For Listowel homeowner Maurice Koetsier, a complete gut and reno of his kitchen was made seamless with the guidance of Heirlooms. He initially approached the Brubachers to build an entertainment unit after a rave review from his brother and sister-in-law who had work completed by them. Koetsier enlisted the couple to upgrade his kitchen, laundry room, bathroom vanity and fireplace surround, and to build bespoke solid wood furniture.

"I appreciated the direct connection to the builder. Because Heather and Dwayne are both the designers and builders, I knew critical details wouldn't be lost in translation."

From previous experience, Koetsier also knew room for error escalates when more hands are involved in a project.

"Heather prompted me throughout the process, making sure I had considered all elements. They didn't hesitate in re-measuring or making adjustments."

Because Koetsier was dealing with an existing structure on his rural property

there were inevitable kinks that make any kitchen reno intimidating — like original window placements. He had several meetings with Heather and Dwayne, with emails ping-ponging back and forth between mock-ups.

After sourcing initial ideas online from Houzz, he was impressed with the couple's ability to create exactly what he desired. In the end, the pre-existing structures and new installation blended seamlessly.

"They are committed to client happiness," says Koetsier, acknowledging he was rather naive about the monumental considerations involved in such a reno. But he quickly placed his trust in Heirlooms.

"They did exactly what I wanted and insisted throughout the process that they wouldn't be happy until I was," he says.

"Maurice was a customer that had a good idea of what he wanted, so in that regard our job was easier than some situations we are in," says Dwayne. "We enjoyed being part of the process as he transformed his home without taking away the character. I feel he picked a style of cabinetry that really worked well with the age of his home but still brought it up to date."

Heirlooms' designs for Koetsier reflect their versatility in skill that enables them to offer intelligent utility and storage solutions for awkward laundry and mud rooms, home office furniture, bedroom and dining suites, and wall units for books and tchotchkes.

Fortunately for them, there will always be customers like Koetsier who appreciate the sophistication of custom cabinetry — and the desire for it will continue to thrive, despite comparatively inexpensive big-box store alternatives.

Still, it's natural to wonder if there is a parallel between the shoemaker fable and the cabinetmaker. The cobbler's son had no shoes.... Do the Brubachers have no cabinets?

Heather laughed when replying, "It's so true! We have renovated several rooms in our house, but the kitchen is in dire need of a facelift!" 