



The 'Anything' Business

Francis and Wane provides high-end cabinetry for consumers in the exclusive desert enclaves of the Coachella Valley.

by Brad Walseth



Tuscan-style kitchens are popular with desert dwellers.

When affluent home buyers build their dream homes in the desert, respected custom cabinetmakers Francis and Wane are there to make sure that they are completely satisfied.

"We are in the 'anything' business," says Chris Britton, the firm's lead custom designer, and he is not kidding. The company specializes in high-end custom homes, but he says they have done everything from NASCAR trailers to rolling barbeques to home theaters to even an indoor 1950s-style diner banquette and an unusual basement "wine cave."

"Anything" means exactly that, and Britton says their clients would not have it any other way. "It's a different market than what most people out there see. Our average

budget is \$200,000 to \$220,000 per job for cabinets in a house. For that cost, when the homeowner says that's what they want — that's what we give them."

Located in Palm Desert, CA, in the exclusive Coachella Valley, Francis and Wane have been in business since 1986 — a virtual lifetime for the area. Although they have done work in places like Texas and the Wilshire District of Los Angeles, Britton says 99% of their work is within the valley. And with 10 golf clubs building 400 to 500 multi-million dollar homes apiece (80 to 100 in construction right now), why would a woodworking firm want to do business elsewhere?

CABINET SECTION: UPSCALE KITCHENS



Francis and Wane's customers are savvy, quality-conscious and often are building their second, third or fourth homes.

"The most expensive job we've done was \$1.6 million," says Britton. And for now, at least, the economic woes affecting the rest of the country seem to have bypassed this region of the United States.

"We are very lucky," Britton says, adding, "We like to say that we are opting not to participate in the current recession."

In fact, business is better than ever for the busy firm. Britton says that their business is 100% high-end residential, with most of their work coming from contractor referral. As a custom shop, they have never had to advertise, he adds.

TECHNOLOGY PROPONENTS

Francis and Wane has had success working out of a 6,400-square-foot shop (with a separate location for offices and showroom), conveniently located within an area teeming with other industry specialists. The company, owned by Brett Long, Jay Andrews and Mark von Iderstein, has 25 employees, many of whom have been with the company for several years. Also important to its strategy, the firm believes strongly in "hiring technology" and to that end has made several major equipment purchases that Britton says have paid major dividends for the bottom line. One of the most important purchases, according to Britton, is a C.R. Onsrud Panel Pro CNC router that the company bought three or four years ago.

"It has exponentially increased our productivity," Britton explains. "Our average kitchen is probably \$45,000 to \$50,000, and we can cut a kitchen in a day. The nested-based assembly is faster. There is no additional machine process after it comes off the CNC. It can go through a panel in about 4-1/2 minutes. In an average kitchen, there



Francis & Wane also offers factory-built kitchens as a lucrative part of its business.

CABINET SECTION: UPSCALE KITCHENS



This gold leaf office is an example of the high-end cabinet work Francis and Wane specializes in.

are probably 80 pieces of sheetgoods. You do the math. We can produce a house of cabinets in the \$200,000 range in about 2 to 2-1/2 weeks.”

“We take the drawings that are already in AutoCAD,” Britton continues, “and integrate them into the Microvellum program. The designs post straight to the machine and all the cutting is done off of the AutoCAD drawings. We kind of went into CNC blind. We got this huge job and knew that we were going to have to up our production, so we took the leap and it has paid off ten-fold.”

All of the parts are nested, except for the drawer boxes, which are 9-ply maple prefinished with dowel construction. The cabinets are lock-dado. “Because we build a true European cabinet,” Britton says, “it makes the assembly that much better.”

But Britton says the move to CNC was not without its challenges. The cost of the router was only one part of the investment, as vacuums, compressors, transformers and the cost of the Microvellum plug-in added to the overall price.

“You worry that this is a lot of money,” Britton says. “You wonder how are we going to make it work? But it makes you work. It used to take us a week and a half to cut a kitchen, and now we can do it in a day. Anybody who is still cutting all their jobs on a table saw simply has no idea.”

Another investment that has paid for itself ten-fold, Britton says, has been a Laser Products Industries’ LT-55 laser templator. The company purchased this device when they did a “monster” job that had a bunch of angles, including a huge, 256-foot curve. Prior to that, the company had to take paper templates, lay it out and cut it all on a table

saw. With the LT-55, they set it up on a tripod and picked points on the wall. The LT-55 creates a DFX file (AutoCAD 3-D vector graphics), from which they are able to produce a floor plan with all the different angles and radiuses, which in turn can be loaded into Microvellum.

A LUCRATIVE SIDELINE

Francis and Wane’s forte is in high-end custom cabinetry, but they found that they were turning away a considerable amount of business from potential walk-in customers, many of whom were not looking to spend \$45,000 to \$50,000 on a kitchen, but were looking more for kitchens in the \$20,000 to \$25,000 range. The company’s focus did not allow it the ability to produce these cabinets themselves, but it hit upon a solution that allowed them to retain this valuable business. The company took on several cabinet product lines, opening a showroom featuring these products in 2003. This division, called F&W Kitchen and Bath, has served to capture business from the general public that might have been lost, while contributing anywhere from \$250,000 to \$1 million per year to the overall company sales.

CHALLENGES INVOLVED

Britton says that working with the affluent is rewarding, but every business has its own challenges. With anywhere from seven to 11 projects ongoing at any time, the company must maintain schedules, follow country club building regulations and work with contractors and quality-conscious customers alike. Britton says this was not always the case.

“Fifteen years ago,” he explains, “we would never meet a



Connoisseurs of the finer things in life appreciate Francis and Wane’s ability to make their ideas a reality.

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When a customer wants something different, like a '50s-style diner (left) or a "wine cave" (right), Francis and Wane is ready to make the client's vision come true.



homeowner. There were homes we did where we never even met the homeowner once. The designer would come in for one meeting and that was it. We would do the job and never hear from the homeowner whether they liked our work or not. Now, the homeowners we are dealing with are much more savvy. These are usually not the first houses they have built. They are often second, third or fourth homes. When you are spending \$4 to \$8 million on a house, you tend to research what you are doing."

Since such homes often can take years to build, this has led to the company developing close relationships with the homeowners — something that Britton expresses considerable satisfaction over. He points out that they have done quite a bit of work on a few celebrities' houses. But lest one thinks Francis and Wane only does work for the stars in this playground for the rich and famous, Britton sets him

straight. "We mostly do work for the people who pay the stars," he says.

These clients tend to have an eye for the beautiful, and Britton says this requires the use of a lot of exotic woods.

"Some of these homes are high-contemporary — ultra modern with a lot of flat veneers, a lot of radiuses and crazy angles, which are fun, but require reinventing the wheel. It really becomes a question of how to make it unique, and a lot has to do with veneer selection. We tend to use a lot of the exotics you never hear about," he adds, "the birds-eyes, the anigre, the figured sycamores, the figured eucalyptus, lacewoods and movingues."

The customers often make the call on veneers. One couple was in a highrise elevator in Chicago and saw paneling they especially liked. They did their own research and discovered it was sapele. Their house was in the Mediterranean style, so Britton says the company did an applied moulding door style with mahogany frames that highlighted the contrast between the woods to great effect.

One client came into the shop and said he had seen a wood called "monkey pine" that he wanted to use in a room, Britton recalls with a laugh. "You sometimes have to go out and figure out what they are talking about."

Some of the most challenging homes have included features like a 70-foot water slide, a home on three lots, where a water-filled channel was dug under the glass floor in the center, and another home with a glass floor that looks down into the garage below, where the owner keeps his collection of rare and prize-winning cars.

"With these homes, we really do have to reinvent the wheel every time," Britton says. "The styles are extremely different on every house. But for me, that's the best part of it. If we were doing the same thing over and over, we'd get bored with it." ❀



The statue of entertainer/former mayor Sonny Bono is the centerpiece of Palm Springs and is symbolic of this unique area.