

Indonesian influence takes kitchen cabinetry to new level

By Katherine Salant

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Many homeowners have been known to lay awake at night, obsessing about the cabinet door styles, countertop materials and floor coverings for their new kitchen. Almost no one loses sleep over the drawer and cabinet door pulls, but this small detail can add a touch of magic, subtle nuance, playfulness or sass, as I discovered at the Kitchen and Bath Industry Show last April in Chicago.

The most unusual drawer and cabinet hardware was Gado Gado International's. Handmade by Balinese and Javanese craftsmen whose skills have been passed down through generations of families for hundreds of years, these cast brass knobs and pulls will add exotic flare to any kitchen or bathroom. David Sussman--an American geologist who spent more than 20 years in Indonesia and came to know and love its rich artistic culture--founded the company six years ago.

Though similar artistic style runs through all the Gado Gado pieces, the astonishing degree of variety makes the company name especially appropriate. "Gado gado" is a standard Indonesian dish that includes boiled eggs, tofu, spicy peanut sauce and whatever vegetables the cook feels like adding. In every restaurant and town, it is always recognizable, but just a bit different.

The unusual shapes of the Gado Gado pieces are typically Indonesian and very different for Americans. Though the firm does offer a few knobs, most pieces are round or elliptical-shaped pulls that hang from a brass plate that is attached to the drawer front or cabinet door. The brass plates are variously embellished with floral, spiral, delicate filigree, or geometric patterns that are inspired not only by Indonesia's own highly developed artistic culture, but also by the European, Chinese and Islamic cultures that have passed through these islands over the last 15 centuries. Each piece has an antiqued patina that's made from black Balinese volcanic ash, and it really does make them look old enough to have been brought back from Asia 80 years ago by your very eccentric, well-traveled, great, great-aunt.

Many of Gado Gado's ring pulls and plates are larger than you would typically find in an American kitchen or bathroom and some homeowners might find them more suited to built-in cabinetry elsewhere in the house.

Gado Gado also offers one-piece hourglass-and-torpedo-shaped pulls that can be as short as 3 inches and a perfect fit for a kitchen cabinet door or as long as 30 inches and more suited to a front door or the doors of the huge restaurant-sized refrigerators and freezers that are increasingly common in upscale homes.

The crisp, strong details of each Gado Gado piece are characteristic of the traditional two-step handcrafted production method used by their Indonesian craftsmen. Each knob and pull begins as an intricately carved piece of mahogany. From this, a mold is made that is used to cast the finished piece in brass. The advantage of this two-step process is that the crisp and sharp lines of the initial carving are carried through to each finished piece; even better these lines are highly visible, even from across the room.

Gado Gado's prices depend on the number of castings that can be made from each mold. The smaller pieces are less expensive because a single mold can produce as many as 500 castings. For the larger pieces, only one casting can be made from each mold. For example, a 2-inch ring with a filigreed, star-shaped plate is \$18. The same thing in a larger, 7-inch size is \$68.

On the other hand, you may be looking for a totally different, simpler and more natural look for your new kitchen. In that case, you might go for the marble pulls offered by Cal Crystals of Concord, Calif. The firm's pulls are offered in five marble colors including white, black, green, red, and beige. Each marble color comes in lighter and darker shades, and each knob is flecked or streaked, a subtle giveaway that it is stone and not plastic.

The round knobs, which have either a rounded ball shape or a flat front (in the knob biz, this is called a "mushroom" shape), are 1 1/4 to 2 inches in diameter. The smallest ones are more suited to the smaller drawers in a bathroom vanity, but any of the larger ones would look well on kitchen drawers or cabinet doors. The knobs are made in Taiwan, which, unbeknownst to most Americans, has many large marble deposits. After the knobs are cut and polished, they are finished with a light lacquer, which prevents any food on sticky fingers or natural skin oils from being absorbed and discoloring the marble. The Cal Crystal knobs are \$6 to \$13 a piece.

Then again, you may be looking for kitchen and bathroom knobs that are bright and snappy. Nifty Nob could be your ticket. Designed by the firm's owner, Susan Zimmermann, these brilliantly colored, cast ceramic knobs range in size and subject matter from 4-inch giraffes to 3-inch angelfish to smaller, slightly less exuberant, floral motifs and simple squared shapes.

Central to the design of each knob, Zimmermann said, is the ease of its use. For example, she explained, her child's bathroom vanity pull is designed so that both a child with small hands and a parent with adult-sized ones can easily grasp it.

Another challenge for knob designers, Zimmermann said, is transferring an inspiration from another source to a knob. For example a duck might seem a natural for a child's dresser, but this shape is awkward to grasp when it is on the front of a drawer.

Ergonomically speaking, Zimmermann said, the best way to know if a knob will work for you is to grasp it with your eyes shut. You'll quickly discover if the shape is easy or awkward to grasp or if it has sharp points that might cut your fingers. Nifty Nob's knobs are \$8 to \$10 apiece.

Perhaps for you, the most important thing about a knob or pull is its color. In that case you should consider Exxel Decorative Hardware. Its "Classic Color Knob & Pull Collection" has 12 knob or pull styles, each one available in 92 colors, including 30 reds that range from the faintest pink to fire engine red.

Both the knobs and pulls are made of cast polymer. Many of these colored knobs are especially bright and, in many cases, downright sassy. With the "Straight Deco Pulls," you can also create some unusual effects because you can mix the bright or mellow color of the pull (the part that your grasp with your hand) with the metal end pieces that attach it to the drawer front or cabinet door. The metal choices include nickel (a matte gray that your friends will never identify), "satin," (steel with a black matte finish that your friends won't identify either) or polished brass (your friends will say its classy). Exxel's knobs and pulls are \$6.50 to \$15 apiece.

As you deliberate which knob or pull for you, don't make your choice on the basis of a photograph. All these manufacturers sent me samples so that I could study the subtleties that cannot be grasped in a quick conversation at a trade show or a photograph. Equally important, don't lock yourself into only one choice for each room. I tried out all but the Gado Gado pieces on my own eight-knob bathroom vanity, and the possibilities of mixing are rich. Not only can you use different colors within one manufacturer's collection, you can mix the work of different manufacturers. For example, on my white melamine eight-knob vanity, the knobs for the cabinet doors under the sink could be Exxel's bright orange cylinder-styled ones, while the knobs on the drawer bases on each side could be different ceramic animal knobs from Nifty Nob.

Contact information:

Gado Gado International: www.gadogadointl.com; click on "hardware."

Cal Crystal: This firm does not have its own Web site. Information is available on www.myknobs.com (click "Cal Crystal" in the search by manufacturer function).

Nifty Nob: www.niftynob.com.

Exxel: www.exxelco.com. To locate a kitchen and bath dealer near you that carries Exxel products, call 800-553-9935.

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