

# BUSINESS

© 1998 Reading Eagle Company, All Rights Reserved

## Crafting a niche in upscale cabinets

■ **Craft-Maid Kitchens Inc.** builds a reputation for high-quality, custom goods with painstaking attention to detail and quality workmanship.

By **Bernard J. Colan**  
Eagle/Times

Kitchen-wise, Reading has provided the "up" in "upscale" for 26 years, even before Tropical Storm Agnes washed Jerry Goldberg and his Craft-Maid Kitchens Inc. back to the city.

"I'm a native of Reading, but I was living in Manhattan when I discovered this area had a reputation for high-quality cabinetry because of its labor talent, so we incorporated here in 1972," Goldberg recalled.

"We originally intended that I stay in New York while we made cabinets here, but it was the year of Agnes and the flood, which caused a lot of damage and forced me to stay."

And stay and stay in the brick elephant of a 46,000-square-foot factory complex at Ninth and Cotton streets, where it is still producing the handmade cabinets that have earned Craft-Maid a national reputation for quality.

To keep pace with a growing demand for that quality, Goldberg, chief executive of the company, just purchased an additional 15 percent of warehouse space across the narrow way it calls a parking lot, and wouldn't discount the need to expand his current work force of 65 employees.

He needs the space to increase production, he said, noting that while many cabinetmakers flourished in the area, his is the largest to survive by aiming for affluent niches in the market.

"In our market, we don't sell a kitchen, we sell a lifestyle," Goldberg said, suggesting that the taste of his customers may range from avant-garde to antique, but all have a common craving for quality.

To demonstrate, on the second of four floors in the complex devoted to producing and painting his products, he pointed out that his company routinely makes cabinet drawers with sides 3/4-inch-thick and with 1/2-inch bottoms, while the industry standard is a quarter-inch thinner.

"When people ask us why we're better, we have to prove why, and this is just one reason," he said.

Other reasons are crammed in bins, containing wood culled from old barn beams that have been sliced up to yield what Goldberg calls "extinct wood," such as hard pine with grain so tight it's as heavy as oak, or wormy chestnut pocked and gouged by insect life cycles.

"Reclaimed wood and antique finished are demanded by the upscale market, so we have suppliers who tear down old barns for the beams, which are sliced up and recycled to make our kitchens," Goldberg explained.

Craft-Maid also uses new wood that is top grade and free of knots and bark, and pieces from the

same tree are carefully marked so the grain in the top drawer of a cabinet will match the direction and the grain of subsequent cabinet bottoms, he said.

Should a customer want that lived-in look — in a kitchen that's never even been assembled — a lengthy process may be necessary with several paintings, dryings and repainting.

"There's a level of artistic expression in the finishes we do," Goldberg explained. "For example, to look really antique, a color like mustard-over-red must be done by employees who get a lot of satisfaction from creativity. That makes a kitchen look exactly right."

Another example of the painstaking processes Craft-Maid follows is the staining process, he added, noting that when a piece of wood is stained at his factory, the stain is not merely sprayed on.

"We hand-wipe the stain, because you can't get the same effect with an automated spraying stain operation, and our customers figure since they're paying top dollar for the wood, they want to see the grain at its very best, and they can see it best when it's applied by hand," Goldberg said.

How top is that dollar? Goldberg wouldn't say exactly, but suggested that upwards of \$15,000 is not unheard of to purchase the appliances alone, in such a kitchen.

Given that appliances may represent 20 percent of a kitchen's total cost, and cabinets 50 percent, Craft-Maid cabinets would fit very comfortably in a kitchen costing in the neighborhood of — hold on to your cash — \$75,000.

He suggested don't shop Home Depot in that exclusive neighborhood, populated by people such as Philadelphia 76ers owner Pat Croce and Florida Marlins owner H. Wayne Huizenga, who kitchen it up with Craft-Maid.

That, he said, only serves to accentuate the difference in markets.

"Upscale doesn't mean stock cabinets, where you have to take what's available," Goldberg said.

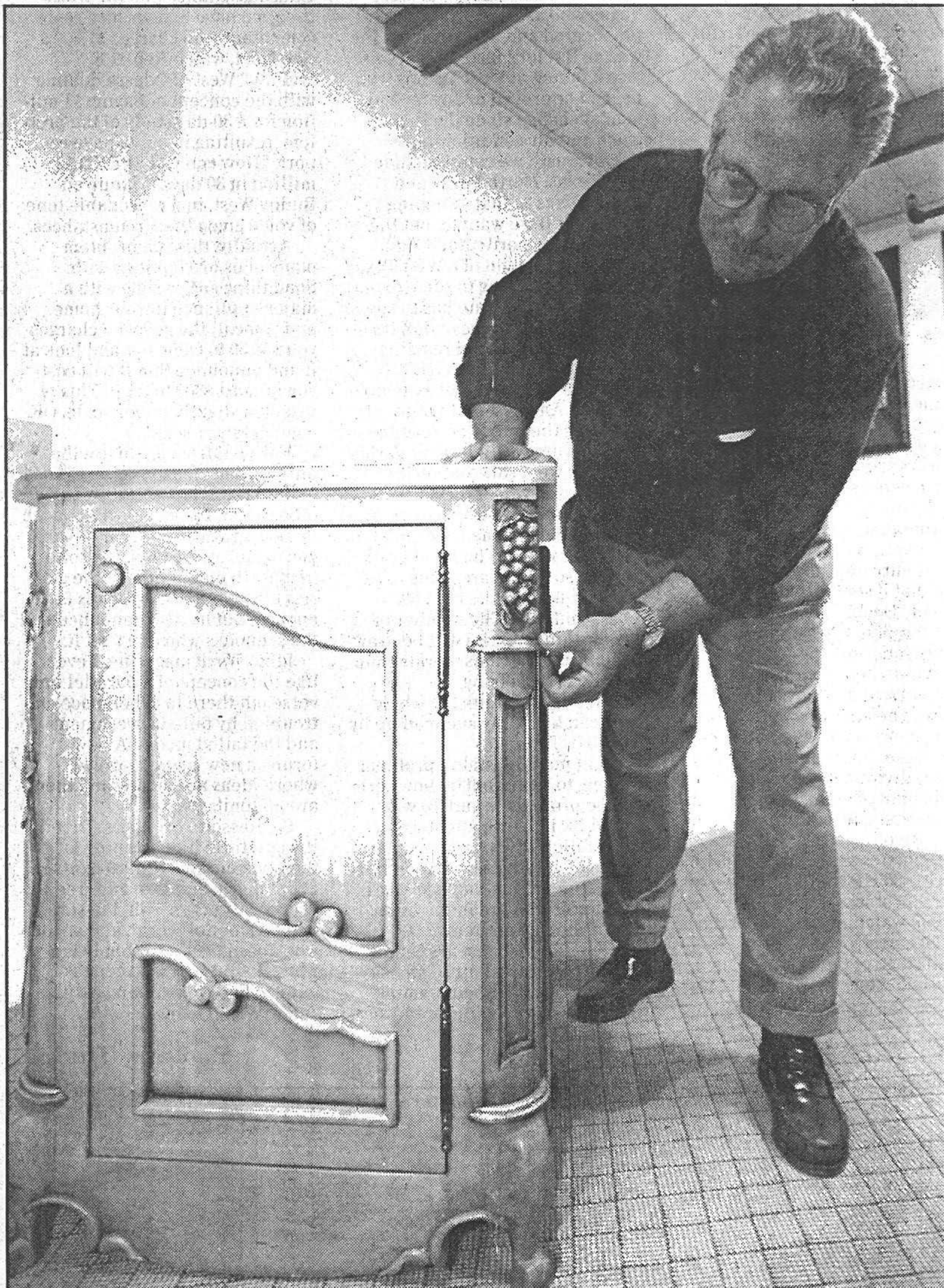
"Throughout the years, these companies have been increasing their capabilities so that some call themselves 'custom' only because they are more custom now than they were 10 years ago."

He described those companies as being "stock-driven," basing their business on the various configurations that can be arranged by using the stock they have on hand.

"We let the customer drive our product line," Goldberg emphasized, noting that if what his customers want isn't on hand, he'll either get it or make it.

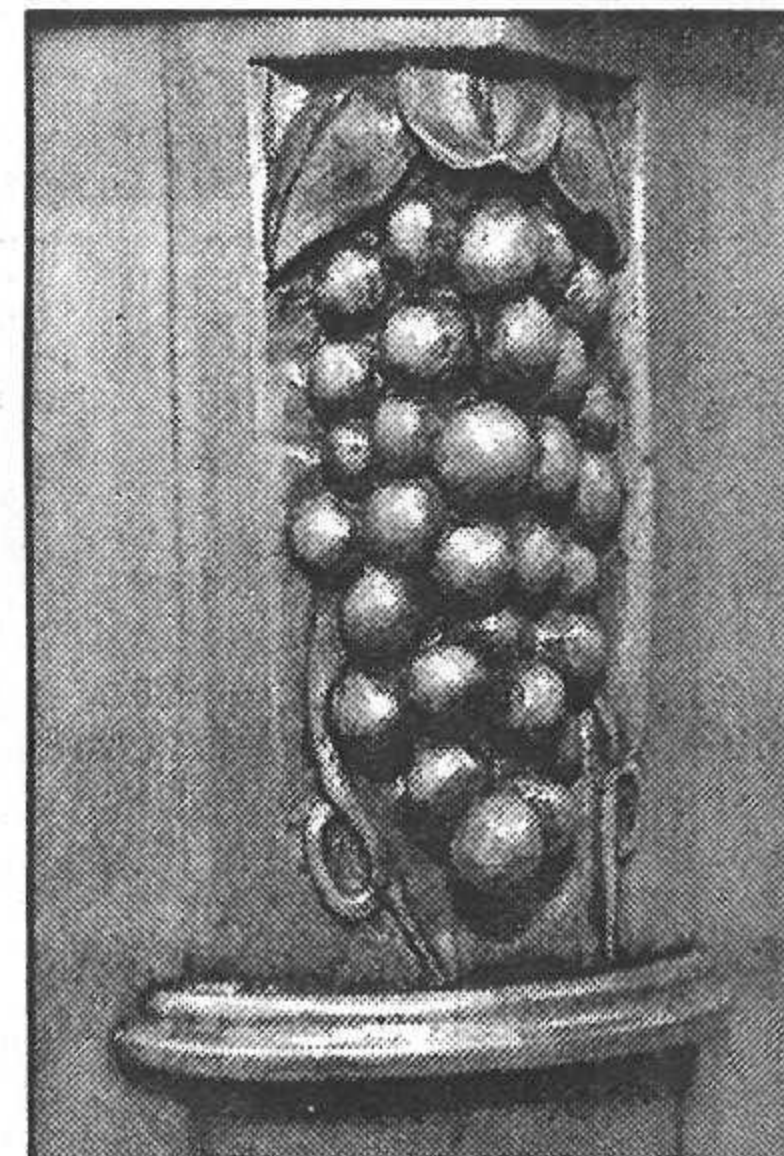
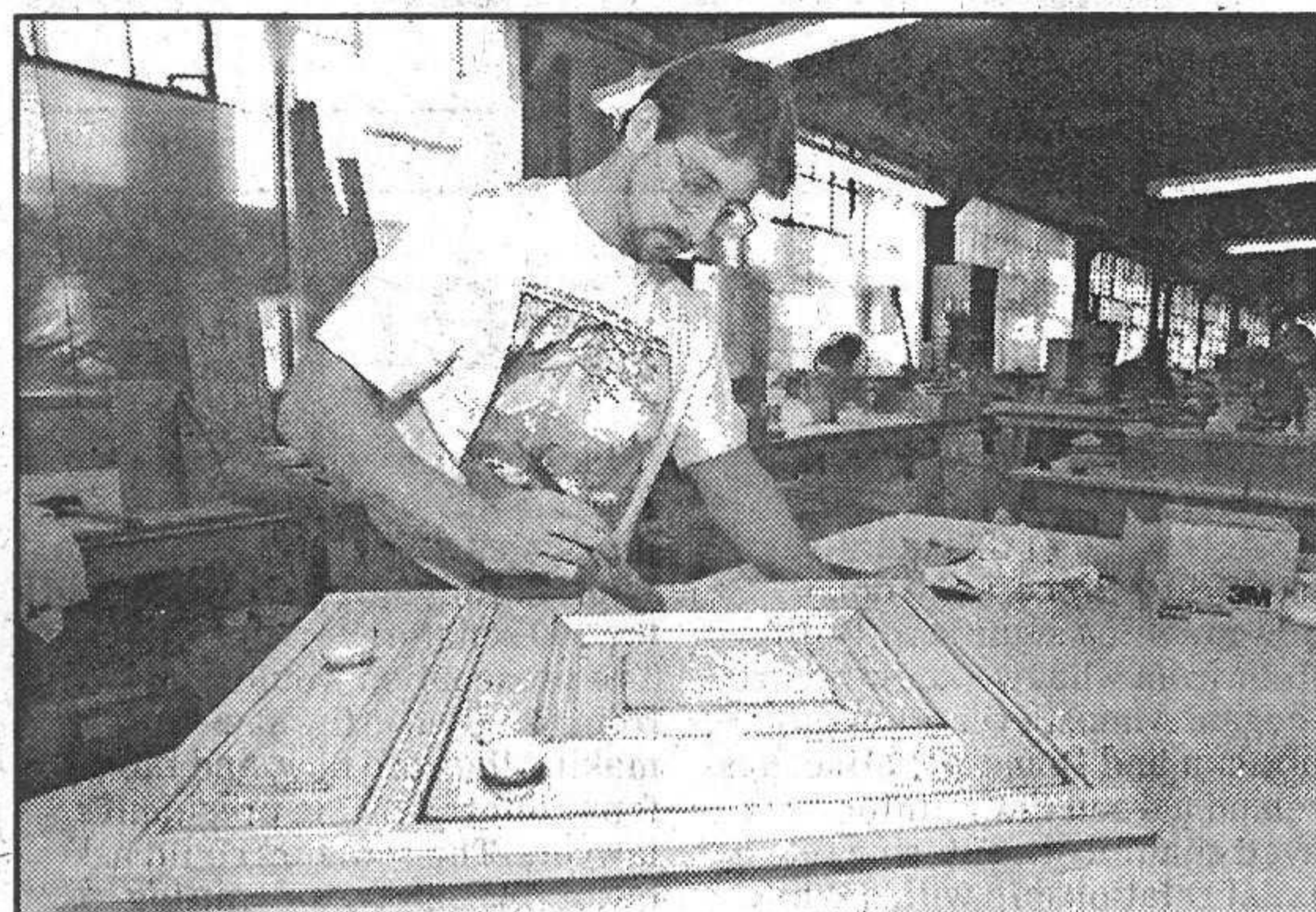
And Craft-Maid customers have driven the product beyond the borders; Germany has recently emerged to be the front-runner in the company's foreign market.

Touring that country recently, he said most refrigerators are almost portable because in many areas food is bought fresh daily; but the affluent are buying American-sized appliances. And, he added, they fit very nicely in cabinets custom-made for them in Reading.



Eagle/Times: Tim Leed

Jerry Goldberg, chief executive of Craft-Maid Kitchens, examines some of the details on a cabinet door produced by his company.



Left: A glazing is applied by the hand of Paul A. Davidavage on a cabinet door manufactured by Craft-Maid Kitchens. Right: An example of a design hand-carved from solid maple used by Craft-Maid Kitchens.