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# Counter Intelligence

Natural or manmade, today's kitchen countertops stand to make an impact



Many factors must be taken into account when searching for the ideal kitchen countertop. With the overwhelming array of options out there, deciding which one is most suitable can be somewhat of a challenge. But today, qualities such as durability and style aren't mutually exclusive. The market is teeming with stylish countertops that will each withstand the test of time.

"Consumers today are looking for surfaces that multitask, meaning they are both gorgeous and easy to care for," said Maureen McGeehan, DuPont Surfaces' marketing manager. While granite is still by far the most popular material, according to Jennifer Gilmer, CKD, of Jennifer Gilmer Kitchen & Bath, Ltd., alternatives like marble are in demand by those who like natural stone, but are "looking for something unusual" to distinguish their kitchens from the mass of "predictable" granite.

Perhaps a more practical solution is granite's "number two." "The next hot surface is going to be quartzites," said Eric Schigiel, VP and cofounder/owner of Opustone. Offering the warm look of marble and the durability of granite, quartz also provides a sleeker look, but with a heftier price tag. Indeed, Kevin Briggs, CMK&B, CR, of Adams Kitchens, finds himself using more quartz in modern spaces and where there is less surface area to cover.

The homeowner's love affair with natural stone can be seen in the popularity of solid surfaces that mimic its look. While consumers "find the movement and color in natural stone to be more dramatic," said Briggs, engineered products come pretty close and have the added bonus of never having to be sealed. As McGeehan said, "Materials inspired by nature impart the complexity found in nature, but without the required care and maintenance."

When it comes to color, the palette goes from "one extreme to the other," said Schigiel. Opting for either very light or very dark countertops, designers and their clients typically "like the 'wow' factor of contrast," explained Gilmer. White marble, in particular, is in great demand; even in solid surfaces such as Corian, "a pure, clean white that interacts well with lighting is always a popular choice," said McGeehan.

Edge treatments depend on kitchen style. Generally, noted Briggs, the more formal the style, the more of an edge treatment. "But, he said, "With trends leaning toward informal spaces and lower maintenance, many clients prefer to keep the edge simple." On the other hand, Don Lewis, director of sales at Hallmark Stone, has seen more customers "upgrading their edges to show a decorative touch," with ogee edges growing in popularity. But there is no question about countertop thickness. Unfortunate for installers, "thicker counters are definitely hot right now," said Gilmer. Opustone and Hallmark Stone both report that, in their markets, 1 1/4-in. thicknesses are the way to go.

Mixing and matching countertop materials is still largely popular in the kitchen, creating visual interest and a range of practical surfaces for various activities. "Sometimes, I'll mix three surfaces—for instance, stone around heat, stainless at the sink and wood for prep and eating areas," said Gilmer. This contrast of materials, said Lewis, "is making for some eye-popping results."

While ease of maintenance is a high priority with those searching for ways to cut back on upkeep and simplify their lives, there are more than enough countertop options for every lifestyle. No matter the desired qualities, a balance of function and aesthetics can be yours! ■

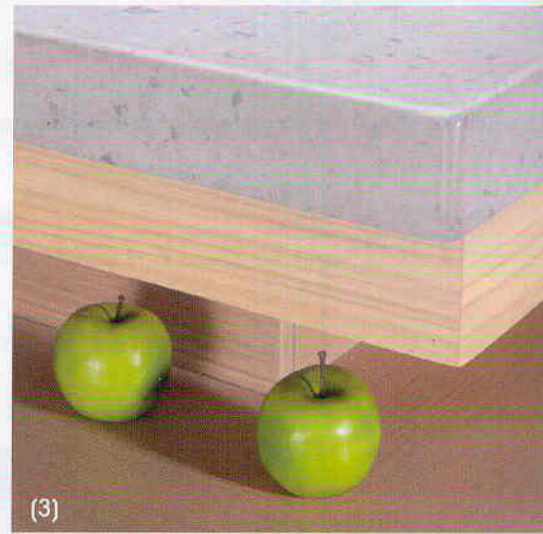
—Sallie Moffat



(1)



(2)



(3)



(4)



(5)

**(1)** For those who prefer a low-maintenance countertop that requires no sealing, **DuPont**'s Corian is now available in 13 new colors, eight of which are part of the company's Private Collection. This includes Lava Rock (shown) with its warm gray base, umber and golden veining and a variety of particles for a complex, earthy, rustic effect. Circle 204 **(2)** Homeowners seeking a more unusual look to distinguish their kitchens from the masses are turning to white marble, more specifically, white marble with brown or gray veining. One such product is **Opustone**'s Bianco Venatina, a polished marble that can be accented with any type of accessory, such as mosaic tile (shown). Circle 205 **(3)** Warmer than granite and more durable than marble, quartz is the next must-have countertop material. **CaesarStone** offers its engineered version (composed of 93 percent natural quartz) in eight colors, taking on organic hues inspired by nature, such as mulberry mist, pebble, Amazon green and nougat. Circle 206 **(4)** A bio-composite material that picks up where PaperStone (its predecessor) left off, EcoTop by **Klip BioTechnologies** is composed of an FSC-certified 50/50 blend of bamboo fiber and recycled wood fiber bound by a water-based resin formula, which offers rich colors that, according to the company, won't fade or discolor. Scratch- and stain-resistant, the material is offered in seven colors. Custom colors are also available. Circle 207 **(5)** Still by far the most popular countertop material, granite doesn't seem to be going anywhere. Offering a wide range of granite countertops that are sealed at installation, **Hallmark Stone** offers numerous colors such as Black Galaxy (shown). Other shades of black are available, as are tones, including blue/purple, cream beige, red/orange and green. Circle 208