

Ask The Kitchen Guy Blog

May 20, 2011

Part 3 of our review of countertop materials – Solid Surfaces, Laminate, Specialty and “Green” Materials:

Question: Hey Kitchen Guy, we are remodeling our kitchen and it is time to pick out a countertop. What material do you recommend and why?

There are three basic types: Hard Surface (Stone), Solid Surface (Acrylic) and Laminate; plus a fourth type that we will call Specialty. For the purposes of this article I will include the newer “Green” materials made from recycled paper or other materials. Specifically the “Green” products discussed today put environmental concerns first. In some cases they have been around the building materials industry for some time but only now are being modified and marketed for counter top. All have unique qualities and there are pros and cons to each.

Solid Surfaces (Corian, Hi-Macs & others)

Solid Surfaces: For the purpose of this article we will restrict our focus to one type of material, Acrylic. This material has been in use for over 35 years and until recently has only been available through one manufacturer, Du Pont, the maker of Corian.

However in recent years competition has come to this market segment due to patent expiration and the introduction of affordable granite and quartz offerings. This competition has been good for consumers in two ways, pricing and product selection. If you haven't taken a look at these offerings yet, you should. *This is not your mother's Corian!*

Pros – Acrylic surfaces are NSF certified. Acrylic surfaces are also repairable. Acrylic surfaces do not stain. If your fabricator has the right equipment, acrylic can be formed into many shapes and configurations from shower bases and sinks to more unusual items like the ones shown below. Most solid surface manufacturers are working hard to be more green or eco-friendly both in their manufacturing processes and product offerings. Both Corian and Hi-Macs from LG Corporation to name just two have offerings with recycled content and or simulated movement.

In the last few years many manufacturers have been adding larger particulates and in some cases developed methods to create movement emulating some of the features that make granite and marble so appealing. Another great feature to solid surfaces is they can be bonded in the field creating a virtually seamless appearance and feel.

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Cons – Acrylic surfaces can scratch and burn, but not easily. The good news is they are repairable. I have heard complaints over the years about staining. They do not stain. Virtually every time I have investigated complaints of staining it was due to the homeowner using abrasives to clean the counter which results in small scratches in the surface. These scratches can catch dirt giving the appearance of a stain, but, in fact, it is just dirt or liquids in the scratch lying just below the surface.

Laminates:

The original counter top material has been making a comeback in recent years. Over the last few years many laminate manufacturers have been introducing vibrant colors and patterns creating a low cost alternative to other more popular materials. Laminates can also be used to create colorful panels and decorative accents.

Pros – They are still considered one of the more cost effective counter top options. Updated colors and patterns provide a vast array of color options. *This is not your grandmothers Formica!*

Cons – They can scratch and do not hold up to heat. For the most part, laminates are not repairable. Moreover, if you have an “L” or “U” shaped counter top, you will have to deal with seams.

Specialty Counter Top Materials:

There are many materials that can fall into this group. For instance, Concrete, Wood, Tile, Bamboo, Recycled Paper products. For purposes of this article we will focus on Wood & Concrete.

Wood: Wood tops are becoming increasingly more popular for islands. These woods can vary widely in color and grain. There are two basic categories for wood counter tops. Butcher Block is usually made from maple and is treated with “food safe” oils and conditioners. The other, Exotic Woods are coated with tung oil or a similar material. These are typically made with more exotic woods and are permanently sealed. They can be used around sinks and the finish is hard and durable. However, a tung oiled finish is not recommended as a cutting surface.

Pros – Butcher Block is not usually used for an entire counter top, but it can be very functional in a food prep area. These tops will scratch when cutting on them which helps building character over time. They are considered food safe.

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Cons – Butcher Block must be treated on a regular basis for sanitary reasons. They must be treated regularly with the “food safe” oils or conditioners. Do not substitute a “non-food safe” oil or conditioner. These tops may or may not be considered green or eco-friendly depending on the manufacturer’s forestry management and harvesting policies and manufacturing procedures. These tops should be treated every two to three weeks depending on use.

Pros – Exotic Woods Coated with Tongue Oil, again, not usually used for an entire kitchen they are typically used for islands and table tops. Tops treated with several coats of tongue oil are waterproof, low maintenance, stain, heat and scratch resistance. They are also considered food safe when dry. Typically a vinegar/water solution keeps the top bacteria-free. They only need to be re-oiled every 12 – 48 months depending on use.

Cons – Exotic Woods Treated with Tongue Oil are generally not used for cutting because they can scratch and are not considered food safe when wet. These tops may or may not be considered green or eco-friendly depending on the manufacturer’s forestry management, harvesting policies and manufacturing procedures.

Recycled Paper Products:

Yes, I said paper. These products typically put the environmental concerns first. In some cases, they have been around the building materials industry for some time, but only now are being modified and/or marketed for counter tops.

Pros – They are eco-friendly, unique and durable. In fact, I have been using an Epicurean brand cutting board made from recycled paper at home for over three years and it has held up extremely well. These materials have even been used to make skating surfaces.

Cons – The color pallet tends to be made of rather flat solid colors. Without a discernable pattern, seams can be more noticeable. The cost can vary widely based on availability in your market area. Although durable, a patina or shiny area can develop in the more frequently used areas of your counter top. Additionally, the lack of general acceptance or use in the market place can be problematic when it comes time to sell.

Special Note: Not all recycled paper or wood products may be NSF (National Sanitation Foundation) certified.

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Here are some examples of what can be done with modern solid surface materials:
Special thanks to Sprovieri's Custom Counter for allowing us to photograph their studio.

Brick pattern(s) great for back splashes or shower surrounds.



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All Corian custom shower



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Custom Corian bench for lobby



Custom Corian counter top, sink, and seating with integrated custom cabinet.



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Custom Corian vanity top



This business is going to the dogs. ☺



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Epicurean Brand Cutting Boards:



MATERIAL DETAILS

	SLATE	NATURAL	NUTMEG	R100
Fiber Source	10% Mixed Hardwoods 90% Mixed Softwoods	20% Mixed Hardwoods 80% Mixed Softwoods	50% Softwood	0% Wood Fiber
Recycled Content			50% Old Corrugated Cardboard (Post Consumer Waste)	100% Post Consumer Waste Paper
Dishwasher Safe	✓	✓	✓	✓
Made In The USA	✓	✓	✓	✓
NSF Certified	✓	✓		
FSC Certified	✓	✓		✓
Greenguard Certified	✓	✓	✓	✓
Heat Resistant to 350°	✓	✓	✓	✓
Knife Friendly	✓	✓	✓	✓



UNTRIMMED MATERIAL

SHOWS MULTIPLE LAYERS OF MATERIAL THAT COMPRISE EACH CUTTING SURFACE.

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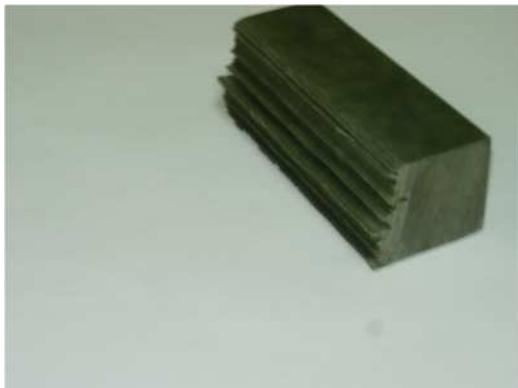
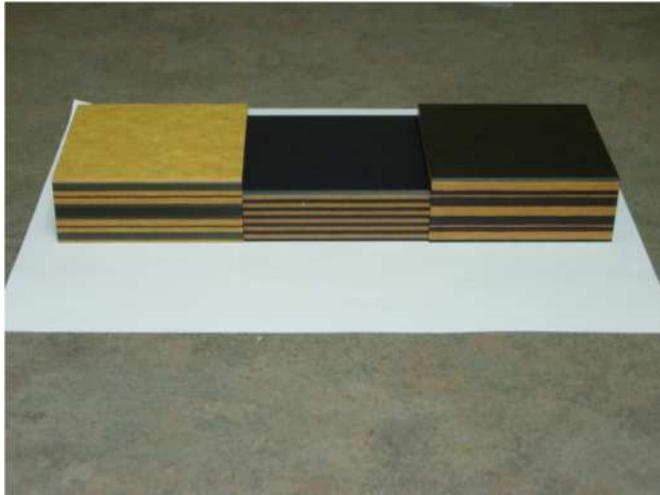
Richlite Brand Counter top materials made from recycled paper and wood products:



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