



Ask The Kitchen Guy Blog

10-25-2014 Updated, revised and condensed from our popular 2011 series on Counter Top materials.

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

Answer: As the purchase of a counter top can be a large part of a kitchen remodel budget, I am going to assume you are a loyal reader of this blog and still in the planning phase. So let's start with a quick review to help you choose your direction for counter top material.

There are three basic types, Hard Surface (Stone including man made quartz), Solid Surface (Acrylic) and Laminate; plus a fourth that we will call Specialty. All have unique qualities and there are pros and cons to each.

Hard Surfaces, this category includes granite, marble, quartz, recycled glass set in resin (similar to quartz), and recycled glass set in concrete and soapstone. Hard surfaces are manufactured or sold in slabs.

A common trait with all hard surfaces is seams. If you have a large island or an "L" or "U" shaped counter top and choose a hard surface, you will most likely have seams in your counter top. Depending on your choice of material, the seams can be very visible.

Granite:

Granite comes in the widest variety of looks, colors and quality. Yes quality, just like diamonds and other precious stones, granite is rated. These ratings can vary. However, first choice is the rating recommended by quality fabricators.

Pros – Generally considered the most beautiful, granite can be polished to a very high sheen. Granite can also be honed (a sort of dull or softer look). Most quality fabricators will make sure your counter top has a sealer on it. They may also offer optional higher grade or longer lasting sealers. Either way, proper care is always recommended.

Cons – It may be natural but I do not consider it green or eco-friendly. Granite is mined all over the world and must be shipped in large container ships, trains and trucks to get it to your door. Moreover, it is typically quarried or strip mined. Granite, like other stones, needs to be sealed and the sealer needs to be renewed from time to time. It is not NSF (National Sanitation Foundation) certified for commercial food preparation.

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Marble:

Marble is generally not recommended in kitchens but can be used in bathrooms and other rooms. If you like the look of marble for your kitchen there are some quartz and acrylic products can look very similar.

Pros – Natural beauty is hard to match. Preferred by some baking enthusiasts.

Cons - Despite the fact that it looks similar to granite, it is not. It is generally considered softer and its properties are different from granite. It is more prone to stains and does not hold up to most cleaners and soaps. It tends to dull over time. Like granite, it may be natural but I do not consider it green or eco-friendly. It is not NSF certified.

Soapstone:

Soapstone is sometimes considered the original stone counter top primarily mined in the north eastern United States.

Pros - Often a serious cook's favorite because of its heat resistant properties. Soapstone also has a unique natural beauty. It is non-porous and will not stain. It can be rejuvenated with linseed or similar oils.

Cons – Soapstone does not polish to a high sustainable sheen. You will have to treat it periodically with oil. Before purchasing, do your homework. Soapstone's unique properties can be both a blessing and a curse. Soapstone is mined in a similar fashion to granite or marble; hence many would not consider it green or eco-friendly.

Quartz and Recycled Glass in Resins:

Quartz and Recycled Glass set in resins are very similar so we will discuss them together. These are manufactured products. Generally speaking, they are made by crushing quartz or glass then mixing them with resins and other materials to create a look and color consistent from one slab to another.

Pros – Color and patterns are consistent. These surfaces are extremely hard and dense, making it very, very difficult to stain or scratch. There is also no maintenance required - just soap and water cleanup. However, you know that there are some counter top cleaners that if used properly will enhance the look of your counter top.

Some quartz colors are made with recycled materials in controlled environments and can be considered somewhat green or eco-friendly. Obviously the brands that feature recycled glass are considered green or eco-friendly as well. Some recycled glass tops are only available in 2cm thickness instead of the more common 3cm using one third less material over all. Most are NSF (National Sanitation Foundation) certified.

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Cons – Resins cannot be polished to the same high sheen as granite or marble. They also lack the movement and natural beauty of many granites and marbles.

Recycled Glass in Concrete is considered by many to be the first green or eco-friendly counter top. While very eye catching and eco-friendly, this type of counter top has very unique characteristics.

Pros – It comes in several colors and is often featured on television shows and articles when eco-friendly counters are being installed. The colored glass against white concrete makes for a striking contrast in many of the offerings in this group. For those who prefer a little less contrast, the concrete can be tinted. Some brands are NSF Certified.

Cons – Striking colors can be a little hard to take at six in the morning before your first cup of coffee. These counters are prone to staining and will require more care and sealing than the average granite or marble. In at least one case I know of, a manufacturer talks about stains adding to the patina of the counter top. Glass pieces can chip out during fabrication. Although repairable, fabrication difficulties make it an expensive option for consumers.

Concrete:

Concrete, as the name implies, is made from concrete. Concrete can take many forms and a variety of colors can be added. It can be prefabricated or forms can be made and the counter can be made on site. Colors, sealers and other treatments can also be added.

Pros – Concrete counter tops typically have an earthy or rustic look. It also has an appealing quality for do it yourself types. However, it is best left to the pros, especially if you are tinting or trying to create a pattern.

Cons - Concrete counter tops are not cheap. Concrete is naturally porous and prone to staining. Even with sealers you can expect to have some staining. Like with Soapstone, I strongly recommend you research this counter top option very carefully prior to committing to it.

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.

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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.

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.

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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 tongue 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 tongue 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.

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.

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 have only been modified and/or marketed for counter tops in the last five years or so.

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 6 years and it has held up extremely well.

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.



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

Recycled paper products make terrific cutting boards, not so terrific counter tops. (See Epicurean brand cutting boards)

Every pot has its lid and every cook has a preferred counter top! It is my hope that this information in combination with spending a little time identifying desires for the finished look and function of your kitchen will help you decide upon the perfect counter top for your dream kitchen.

Fondly,
The Kitchen Guy

Recommended Informational Sources:

www.marble-institute.com