

## **Kitchen Countertops: Sifting Thru the Many Choices**

### **Marble Countertops**

Marble is a crystallized limestone, composed of quartz which can be polished to a mirror-finish, bringing out depth and color, for an elegant countertop. Marble is an excellent choice for a countertop because it is hard, compact and heat resistant. It comes in a variety of colors and can be finished using different methods for different looks, from a highly polished look to a matt or rough finish. Marble countertops require little maintenance to keep their original fabricated look; however, it is still a good idea to avoid setting hot pots directly on the surface as it could cause the seal coat to become discolored. The natural stone material is also highly resistant to scratches, cracks and breakage.

### **Two main types of Marble Countertops**

The two main types of marble countertops are slab, which is relatively expensive and can last a lifetime, and marble tiles, which are less expensive. The tiles can be damaged if enough stress is placed on them and they can be expensive to repair. Marble countertops are ideal for restaurants because they are non-organic and only slightly porous. They are easily disinfected with store-bought products. They make a great impression on diners and clients. Marble is also very impressive for the home, adding culture and class. Marble withstands frequent use and maintenance is simple. Wipe spills as soon as possible after they occur, to keep your marble countertop clean and glowing.

### **Granite Countertops**

Granite is another natural stone material for countertops that is known for its durability, high-performance and elegant look. It will endure the every day rigors of kitchen activity as it is heat and stain resistant and easy to maintain. Granite is a hard material that will not scratch or crack easily and it is available in hundreds of colors. It is very easy to maintain with sealers and cleaning products available that are specifically designed for use on granite countertops.

Granite can be a relatively expensive material due to the cost of labor as it must be cut and polished with great accuracy, but the expense is easily offset by the beauty and elegance it adds to your kitchen or bathroom. Granite countertops are usually professionally installed because they require the use of special tools and equipment. This is not a material for the jack-of-all trades to install. The granite slab must be adjusted for thickness variations and leveled perfectly to reduce stress and avoid cracking over time. The precision cuts to allow for wall outlets, switches and faucets are done with a diamond edged saw.

### **Soapstone**

Soapstone is relatively soft and easy to work with, yet durable enough to stand up to some abuse. Soapstone is a form of metamorphic rock containing magnesium, dolomite and talc and is so named because touching its surface produces a sensation similar to that of a bar of soap.

The scientific name for soapstone is steatite; it comes from deep in the earth, like quartz, marble and diamonds. It is geologically related to marble; however, it is less expensive and more stain resistant. It does not react to acidic substances and virtually nothing you spill on it will cause permanent staining. It is very durable, with a matt finish, but the available colors are limited to gray and black.

### **Corian**

Corian is a popular brand of solid surface countertops for people who want something of better quality than a laminate, but cannot justify the expense of granite or marble. Corian is basically plastic, so colors are not as rich in tone as with natural stone, nor is it available in as much variety. It is not heat resistant; a hot pot will melt the surface. Care must also be taken to avoid scratching the surface.

### **Contemporary, Synthetic Materials**

Less expensive materials for contemporary kitchen design include wood, stainless steel, laminates, glass, concrete and ceramic. These materials come in a wide variety of colors and textures but they are outdated and less durable than the natural stone products like granite or marble.

Formica is a laminate material that used to be the first choice for home builders, interior designers and housewives. It is easy to install, comes in a variety of colors and is relatively inexpensive. It is not nearly as durable or elegant as natural stone products and can be easily stained, cut or damaged. Great care must be taken if you have a laminate countertop. Different stains may require different products to remove them. Tough stains may be impossible to remove without doing permanent damage to the surface.

Ceramic tile offers a wide variety of colors and textures but is no longer considered a favorable choice for countertops. This is because the grout joints tend to stain and it can chip and crack easily when used as a countertop.

Stainless steel has its advantages, but offers no choices in color or texture. It is fine for some restaurants, but not very decorative for a home.

### **Considerations:**

There are many things to consider when choosing a countertop, including looks, cost and durability. If your home is in an area of lower class residents and you do not plan to stay it much longer, you may go with something less expensive in order to get a good return on your investment. But, remember, if you are going to be in the home for many years, you will want something durable, so that when it comes time to sell, there is less room for a buyer to negotiate your price down. Buyers look more closely at kitchens and bathrooms because these are the most expensive rooms to remodel. If your home is located in a middle-class or upper-class class area, you should most definitely consider using granite or marble for your countertop as this is most likely the choice of homeowners in the area. You get what you pay for and your kitchen and bathroom are well worth the additional cost of quality materials.

This article was written by Chuck Russo, owner of Surface Encounters, the leading granite and marble countertop fabricators in the US. Choosing the slab for your countertop is the most difficult part of the kitchen remodeling project. Surface Encounters has registered interior designers available to help with the process of choosing the material and planning the project so customers are 100% satisfied with their new natural stone countertops.