



# COUNTER

culture

BY JULIE BAWDEN-DAVIS



NATURAL STONE and granite continue to be popular choices for countertops. But there are new options, such as quartz surfaces. Above is a choice from Caesarstone's Twilight collection. At left is Caesarstone's Crystal product. Many of the new choices are available in custom colors. Consumers also can choose from some high-end concrete options. The counter, above right, with drain slope, is from Geocrete.

When it comes to creating the perfect kitchen, countertops play a starring role. Walk into any kitchen and the first thing you'll see is the countertop. Prepare and serve food and it's the surface you'll use the most.

Ask most home chefs the ingredients of an ideal countertop and they'll tell you that appearance is just as important as function. "Consumers are looking for the perfect product in countertops, which means durability, stain resistance and something that is particularly eye-catching," said Valerie Graves, sales manager at Olive Mill in Anaheim Hills.

While granite is still a popular choice for kitchen counters thanks to its durability and rich composition, many homeowners are moving away from this natural stone and looking for something different that offers a wider range of color.

"The market has been overwhelmed by granite in the last 10 years, and we're finding that many people are looking instead for something exclusive that has a lot of color," said Jean Pauwels, president of North American operations and importing

for Pyrolave. The company produces enameled lavastone countertops that can be found through the Clovis Collection in Santa Monica.

Color ranges found in some of the newer introductions to the countertop scene such as lavastone, concrete and quartz are often vibrant and eye-catching. You'll find moss green, plum, mango, bright blue, yellow and fire-engine red, as well as your more traditional gray, black and beige.

"Thanks to the introduction of new countertop materials, like quartz surfaces that are engineered but look like natural stone, you can attain the ideal countertop," said Graves.

Many of these countertop products are also offered in custom colors.

"As kitchens become a focal point in the home, they're being used to make a statement about who we are as people," said Bob Paradiso, vice president of sales and marketing for Caesarstone, a quartz-based countertop product. The many new materials and designs allow people to create "one-of-a-kind" kitchens, he said.

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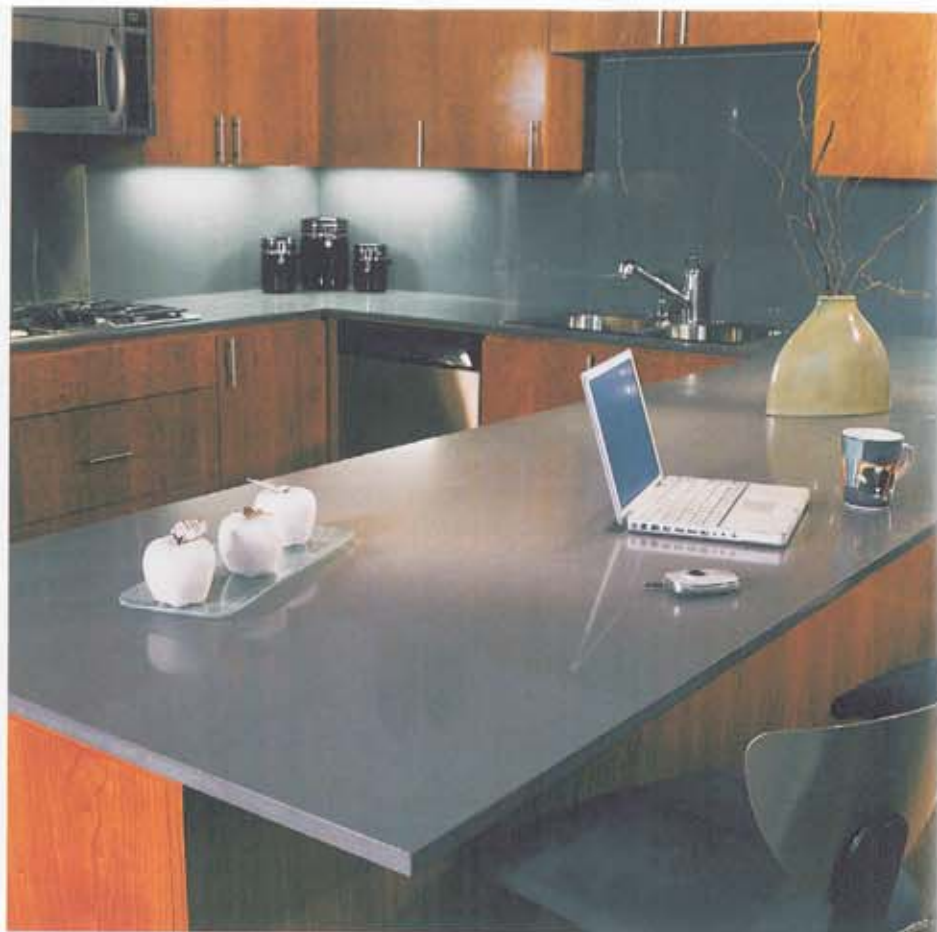
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ONE ADVANTAGE of this quartz countertop is that it has the look of natural stone, with a more consistent color and pattern, and comes in a wide variety of colors.

distinctive kitchen workspaces is a growing trend, agrees Jared Pompilio, account representative for Geocrete, which manufactures concrete countertops that can be found at Euro Kitchens & Bath in Laguna Beach.

Popular in design circles, concrete comes in a wide range of colors and can be molded into any shape. Inlaying objects and lettering in concrete countertops has become a popular form of personal expression, said Pompilio. "We've added coins, glass pieces, mosaics and fossils. Just recently we installed a crystal that a couple got from their son years ago. It's embedded in the countertop right next to the sink and serves as a constant reminder of him."

Self-expression is also big with backsplashes. Rather than serve as a bland extension of the countertop, backsplashes are being used as an artistic focal point for the kitchen.

"The trend is to go for a full backsplash, rather than the traditional 4-inch splash," said Paradiso. Tile designs in correspond-

ing colors and patterns are common on backsplashes, as is creating a scene with painted tile.

Combining materials is catching on in the kitchen as a whole.

"If you have 40 square feet of countertop, you might not want all concrete or all granite," said Pompilio. "Using different materials makes the kitchen more visually appealing. We're seeing a lot of mixing. For instance, an island made of concrete with a wood cutting area, a tile backsplash and honed granite for the rest."

Edge treatments are also changing. "We're moving away from the traditional round-over edges and using more extravagant borders," said Paradiso. "You now have options such as the triple pencil, which consists of three thin lines, ogee, which is concave and a waterfall edge. Mixing and matching is also big."

What's on the horizon for kitchen countertops?

"In the near future we'll be seeing more unusual materials and designs," said Paradiso. "This year we're introducing a line of

countertops made from semi-precious stones like turquoise and flint."

COUNTERTOP OPTIONS

With so many countertop materials to choose from, the choice can be overwhelming. Consider the following popular countertop options. Prices listed are per square foot, installed, except where noted.

**Concrete:** Made of cement, sand, aggregate and water, concrete isn't just for the garage floor anymore. It can be poured to fit any mold and cast on site. Cement comes in a variety of hues, including custom colors.

**Disadvantages:** Concrete is somewhat porous and must be sealed properly to resist staining. Over time it will grow a patina. Marks will be left if you cut on it.

**Price:** \$150-\$175 (not installed).

**Glass:** No longer just for dishware, glass has moved onto countertops. It comes in a variety of colors and textures and is non-porous and therefore stain-proof. It can also handle hot pots.

**Disadvantages:** Glass will break or chip if a heavy object is dropped on it, requiring replacement. It also scratches, so cutting boards must be used. Fingerprints show and edges must be rounded for safety purposes.

**Price:** \$60-\$150.

**Hardwood:** The most commonly used wood surface for countertops is butcher block, which is made of stacked and glued hard maple pieces. It provides a convenient built-in cutting surface that won't dull knife blades.

**Disadvantages:** Wood requires sealants and regular application of mineral oil. It

will show knife marks, although they can be removed with sanding and re-oiling. Prone to water damage, it shouldn't be placed near sinks.

**Price:** \$30-\$60.

**Lavastone:** Quickly gaining popularity as a countertop surface with an especially unique look and wide color selection, this glazed volcanic rock material, which is similar to glass in appearance and texture, is non-porous and won't stain. It is also scratch-resistant.

**Disadvantages:** The finish is generally glossy. Few semi-glossy colors are available at this time.

**Price:** \$250-\$400.

**Natural stone:** Valued for its beauty and durability, natural stone is a popular choice, especially granite, which resists scratching and chipping. You can cut, roll dough, and place hot pots directly on granite. Marble is another favorite for rolling dough and making pastries, but it lacks granite's durability. Other less frequently used natural stone surfaces include limestone, slate and soapstone.

**Disadvantages:** Because they are natural stone, these countertop materials can be inconsistent in their coloring and patterns. Color selection overall is also limited. Subject to staining, it must be sealed on a regular basis. Products containing abrasives and acidic foods like lemons and vinegar will harm them. Special cleansers are required.

**Price:** \$70-\$100.

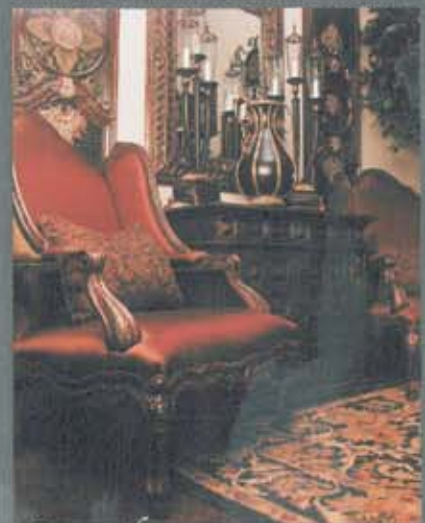
**Quartz:** This countertop material is created by mixing quartz (about 93 percent) with polyresin (generally 7 percent). A popular brand is Caesarstone. While



NO MATTER what you choose for a countertop, designers suggest mixing materials, such as granite, wood and stainless steel, to give your kitchen more visual appeal.

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THERE ARE many new choices in colors and shapes for countertops. This island features different surface heights, to accommodate varying needs.



quartz has the look of natural stone, it has a more consistent color and pattern, and comes in a wide variety of colors. Virtually maintenance-free, it is stain-resistant and nonporous, requiring no sealing. You can cut on this durable surface.

**Disadvantages:** Although quartz can withstand some heat, it is best not to place very hot pans on it.

**Price:** \$60 to \$80.

**Solid surface:** Made from synthetic sheets consisting of mineral compounds and polyester or acrylic resins, these countertops are smooth and uniform in color and pattern. Color options are abundant and a variety of finishes are available. Corian is a popular brand.

**Disadvantages:** May crack after a hot item is placed on it. It will stain and scratch, but the stains can often be rubbed out and the scratches sanded.

**Price:** \$40 to \$60.

**Stainless steel:** Popular in kitchens where a professional restaurant look is sought, alloy steel has some chromium, which makes it rust-resistant. It can handle hot pots, won't stain and is easy to clean. Feels smooth and cool to the touch.

**Disadvantages:** Steel will show scratches and fingerprints and it can dent

and be noisy if the base isn't strong.

**Price:** \$85-\$100.

**Tile:** Mixing and matching tile shapes and designs can create a unique, personalized look in the kitchen. There is a wide variety of stunning hand-painted tiles available for backsplashes. Popular tile materials include ceramic, porcelain, natural stone and glass. Tile can withstand hot pots and resists moisture.

**Disadvantages:** Grout may stain and must be sealed well to avoid bacteria build-up. Tile surfaces generally aren't smooth enough for cutting or rolling dough.

**Price:** Up to \$100, depending on the design.

#### RESOURCES

- Caesarstone, [www.caesarstoneus.com](http://www.caesarstoneus.com)
- Clovis Collection, (310) 319-6104
- Euro Kitchens & Bath, (949) 494-3341
- Geocrete (Cheng Design), [www.chengdesign.com](http://www.chengdesign.com)
- Olive Mill, (714) 528-3789, [www.olivemill.com](http://www.olivemill.com)
- Pyrolave, [www.pyrolave.com](http://www.pyrolave.com)

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