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# Counter Revolution

Trends in kitchen  
surfaces

*New Products at K/BIS*  
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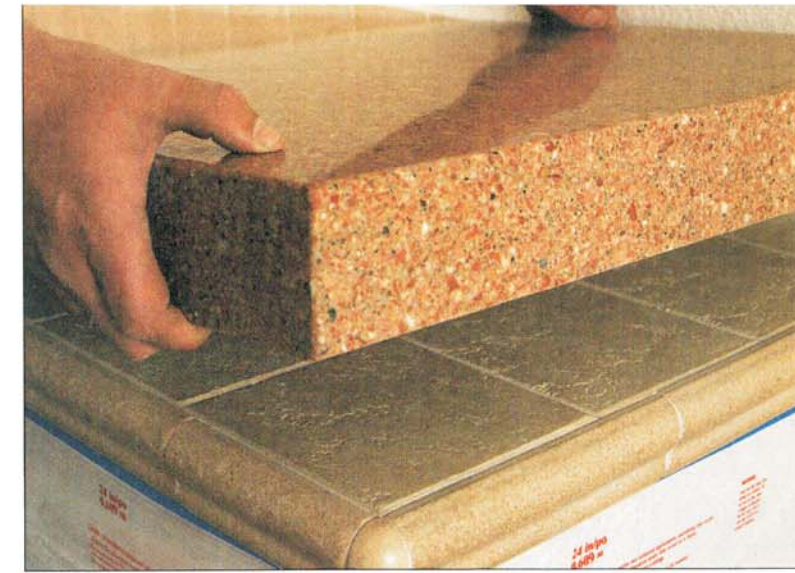
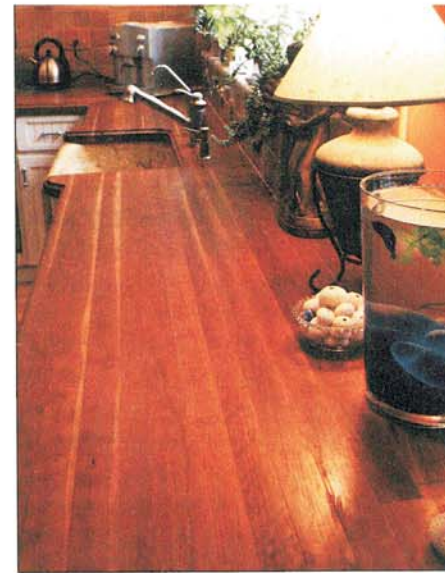
*Fu-Tung Cheng*  
*Cheng Designs*  
*Orinda, Calif.*



By Jon Minnick

# Counter revolution

With so many options, counter surfaces are gaining momentum for a fresh kitchen look



(above left) Granite Transformations being installed (above) Grothouse Lumber countertop



Samsung's Staron line

TIME WAS THAT REMODELING A KITCHEN meant little more than new dish towels, matching potholders and maybe a coat of paint for the cabinets. The expense of redoing cabinetry, flooring or countertops was seen as frivolous or simply beyond the means of

the typical American family. Of course times have changed and so has the average level of disposable income in American households. The shift toward larger kitchen remodels has been slow, but steady. It began with different wall treatments and bubbling sheets of

Contact paper and has progressed to the wholesale material upgrades and complete room remodels we see today. Presently, cabinetry is the first thing replaced in the kitchen remodeling frenzy. Countertops run a close second place to cabinets and are closing the gap.

### Consumer practices

A recent assessment by the National Kitchen and Bath Association (NKBA) of kitchen and bath materials in residential construction, predicts that total kitchen remodeling spending will reach just over \$45 billion by the end of this year. In fact, the area of kitchen remodeling has grown 32.3 percent in jobs, and spending has more than doubled since the decade before. As it stands, current kitchen remodeling spending is approximately a \$28.5 billion increase from 1987 and is expected to rise to just under \$57 billion in total kitchen funds by 2011. The figures may sound impressive, but where is all of this kitchen money going?

Countertops certainly hold a great deal of importance in the design element of a kitchen, says Jillian Stroh, a designer with Designer's Showcase Kitchens & Baths, Carol Stream, Ill. With increased innovations to countertop technologies and styles, it should come as no surprise that they hold so much bearing on homeowners' ideas. According to a 2002 Design Trends Survey conducted for the NKBA, the top three items accounted for in the budget of a complete kitchen remodel were: cabinets 36 percent, countertops 14 percent and appliances 12 percent. Beyond that in the budget, items dropped to 6 percent or less of the total allocated funds. But that still was a few years ago and this is now.

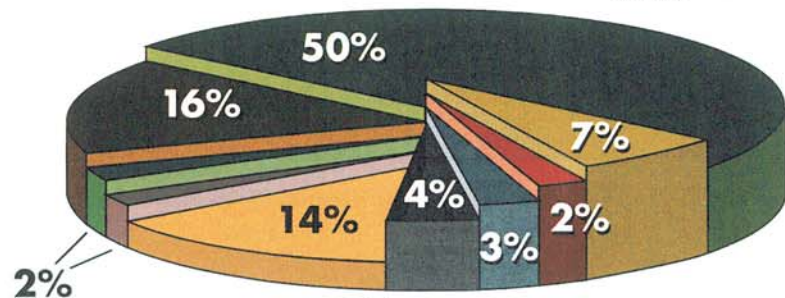
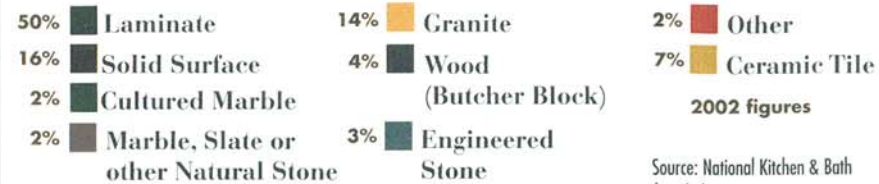
"Counters are right up there with cabinets for an overall new look," says Stroh. "Many have found that new counters alone have made their kitchens look completely different and more and more people are making countertops a first step."

Susan Reinke of Susan Reinke Kitchens & Baths, Warren, Pa., deals primarily with mid-end homeowners and feels countertops hold an even higher position. "Countertops are huge right now. They're about as equal as cabinetry from what I'm seeing," says Reinke.

It is estimated that while 60 percent of new countertops are installed by remodelers, only one-third of these countertops are purchased by them. The market has shifted to what is being called the "buy-it-yourself" market. Almost

## Product Trends

### Residential Remodeling



Residential resurfacing trends in 2002

"Counters are right up there with cabinets for an overall new look." Jillian Stroh

half of the countertops being purchased today are coming from big box retailers, and many homeowners are becoming more involved in their designs.

"Homeowners are educated on options and costs," says Reinke. "They know what they're looking for and where to get it to save on cost."

The face of countertops has changed vastly over the last hundred years. Today's kitchen sees anything from granite, wood, solid surfacing, ceramic tile, cultured marble, engineered stone, natural stones or concrete. Still the No. 1 countertop material installed in new homes or during a remodel is laminate. This is due primarily because of the cost involved in many of the other applications along with continued

maintenance with some of them as well. But these other materials aren't without their appeal, and because of such have been slowly eating into the market share of laminates.

"When people are building a new home, they settle with laminates because they are cheaper, but they are saving up for the more expensive materials like granite," says Stroh.

Surface area is also expected to play a big factor in remodels. Homeowners like their counter space and aren't willing to part with any of it, and in some cases are adding islands to enlarge it. In this respect, surface area should remain about the same or grow bigger as kitchens are remodeled.

"Surface area is definitely increasing," says Stroh. "And I think they will become much larger. Space is becoming just as important as storage."

Another trend sweeping kitchens is the range of color choices. Hues are balancing between mediums and darks in countertops which is regularly offset with lighter colors in cabinets.

"Countertop colors are becoming very neutral," says Amy Brown with Dreammaker Bath & Kitchen by Worldwide, Waco, Texas. "I'm seeing lots of blacks. If homeowners want color in their countertops, they opt for a bold accent color on their island."

#### The modern picture

There is a strong consensus that what homeowners want in their kitchen remodels is granite. While once limited in production, granite has expanded its offerings and homeowners are getting over their phobia of preserving granite that once turned them off to the material.

"I'm seeing a lot more natural stones, especially granites," says Micqui McGowen of Kitchen & Bath Concepts, Houston, Texas. "A lot of times homeowners [order] matted [finishes]

to reduce sheen, but seem less concerned about the upkeep than they are used to."

For homeowners that want the look of granite, but are still hung up on the maintenance, Granite Transformations, a company based in Loma, Calif., has addressed this issue along with the time it takes to replace countertops. Boasting "the stunning look of Italian granite and glass mosaic without the high cost and difficult installation," its product is a mix of granites, quartz or glass with a special resin that is heat, scratch and stain resistant. The counters are designed to fit over your existing counters, in what basically amounts to a "slipcover" for your countertops. It requires no demolition and can be done in one to two days — saving time and the hassles of cleanup.

Because of the growing popularity of granite, quartz is getting a leg up in the surfacing market as well. Cambria touts, "unlike other natural stone surfaces you never have to seal or polish." This is especially pleasing to consumers who still see granite as a maintenance issue.

"People come in asking for granite, but after some education they are ending up with quartz," says

Brown. "If they are still set on some granite in their kitchen they will usually just put in on their island and use quartz for the rest of their counter areas."

Quartz producers are also being innovative in pushing forward its use in homes. With new options like Cosentino's Silestone line's soon-to-be-released "leather" finish quartz countertop or their teaming up with Microban International to create a countertop with built-in antimicrobial protection, consumers are getting what they never thought possible in surfacing.

Laminates have always had a huge hold on the surfacing market. With the wide variety of colors and patterns along with the lower cost, most homeowners have gravitated in this direction. But they are quickly losing their slice of the pie. According to NKBA data, laminates held a 68 percent share in kitchen remodels in 1997, dropping 18 percent to half the market in 2002. Laminate companies who have seen this trend are responding with laminates that reflect a closer appearance and style to some of the natural stones: like Wilsonart Laminate's new polished stone look Fusion and its tumbled stone effect Roca lines.

Use the Reader Service Card for more information from the following suppliers:

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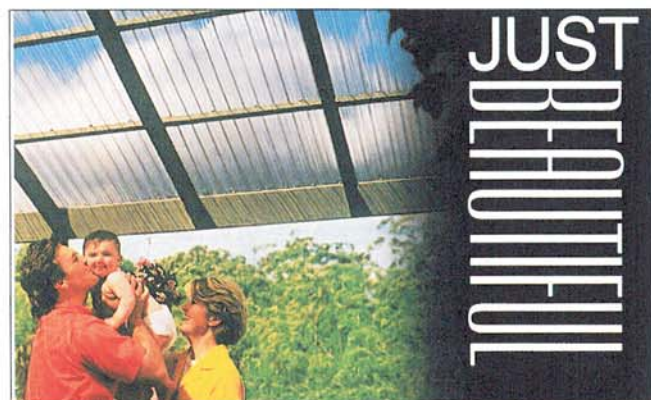
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## The Pros and Cons of Countertops

Contrary to what many manufacturers would have us believe, there is no perfect countertop material. Every product has its ups and downs, and it is really up to the consumer to decide how they will use their surface and the look they are going for. Of, course it is also a good idea to be up-to-date on the pros and cons of each option.

### GRANITE AND NATURAL STONES

**Pros:** Sinks can be undermounted and surface can handle hot pans and can resist most stains if properly sealed.

**Cons:** Granite can be scratched and leaves watermarks if not cleaned up immediately. Also, seams are very evident, especially if the surface has a clear pattern.

### QUARTZ AND ENGINEERED STONES

**Pros:** Scratch-resistant engineered stone is nonporous and is hard to stain. Made of crushed natural stone and resins, it doesn't require sealing.

**Cons:** Expense is No. 1, some consumers feel it is too uniformed in looks, will contain seams and doesn't always come with a heat-resistant guarantee.

### LAMINATES

**Pros:** Low cost, easy maintenance and huge range of colors and patterns, including some that imitate the look of natural and engineered stone surfaces.

**Cons:** Hot pans and knives could damage the surface, which isn't easily repairable, plus long-term moisture problems can cause the laminate layers to separate.

### SOLID SURFACING

**Pros:** This nonporous counter material is hard to stain, can be made in nearly every size and shape seamlessly. Maintenance to repair scratches or burns can generally be repaired.

**Cons:** Some solid surfacing can be pricey and has the potential to melt with hot pans placed on them. The finish may also need to be rebuffed as it dulls down over time.

### WOOD

**Pros:** Natural look for the kitchen that can be easily repaired. Can be custom designed with patterns and designs with different woods for a look not available with any other materials.

**Cons:** Can have problems with expansion and contraction issues around water and if not properly put together. It is also just as vulnerable as most materials in regard to heat and scratches.

### CONCRETE

**Pros:** Can be formed into just about any shape and has a unique feel to it. It can also be polished for a high shine or matted down for a dull finish.

**Cons:** Can be pricey, easily stained and requires high maintenance. With time, concrete may chip and crack, and even with color and additive options has more of a cold, industrial look to it.

### CERAMIC TILE

**Pros:** Comes in a variety of colors and styles, generally at a lower cost than most counter materials.

**Cons:** Grout areas can be hard to get completely clean and can stain. If not properly installed, tile can have a greatly uneven surface and dull or scratched tiles can stand out amongst high gloss tiles.

nesses don't have. One company, Cheng Design, is out to change this trend and increase utilization of concrete in the home.

Best illustrated in his book *Concrete Countertops*, Fu-Tung Cheng has built his business on a solid foundation of concrete. Not only has he mastered the art of concrete design in the modern home (as shown on the cover), but he is sharing that knowledge with others in two specific ways. First, his Cheng Concrete Exchange, a division of Cheng Design, has opened its doors to individuals wanting the opportunity to study the skills necessary to design and build concrete surfaces in homes. Secondly, his company has developed all the tools needed to implement these skills with a line of products for builders and remodelers to create with. But this is not to say that they are the only ones interested in home concrete applications.

Several companies see the trend and innovation to use concrete in this new form. Countercrete, Menomonee Falls, Wis., is marketing its own concrete products and designs with a focus on countertops and furniture. Even the concrete and cement companies like Quikrete are cashing in on this inclination with its line of cement color, nonshrink precision grout and acrylic cure and seal products supporting these uses.

"Concrete is much bigger on the West Coast," says Karas. "The East has taken much longer to get concrete tops, but I think it will play a role in the future of countertop design."

### The future of surfaces

"When engineered stone redefines itself better, I can see it playing a bigger role in the future," says Karas. "As it stands now, granite is about 95 percent of my business."

As time goes on, it would seem that counters are making a bigger impact on what defines the look of a kitchen and could continue to chip away at cabinetry as the most expensive item budgeted for in a kitchen remodel. With options increasing for countertops, it's not hard to see why either.

"I continue to see laminates grow because they are becoming harder and just so much better," says Reinke. "Solid surfacing colors are so broad that I could see that area going down."

It would seem that countertops, like now, will be an ever-changing situation. With improvements to the technologies, educated consumers and higher amounts of disposable income, remodelers are set to be winners in the world of kitchen countertops. And even though everyone has their own take on the future of surfaces, it is clear that countertops are going to continue to be a critical aspect of kitchen remodeling.

"It may not always be the focal point of the kitchen, but is always going to be important," says McGowen. "Counters always add to the look and feel of a kitchen and could make or break how it looks." ■

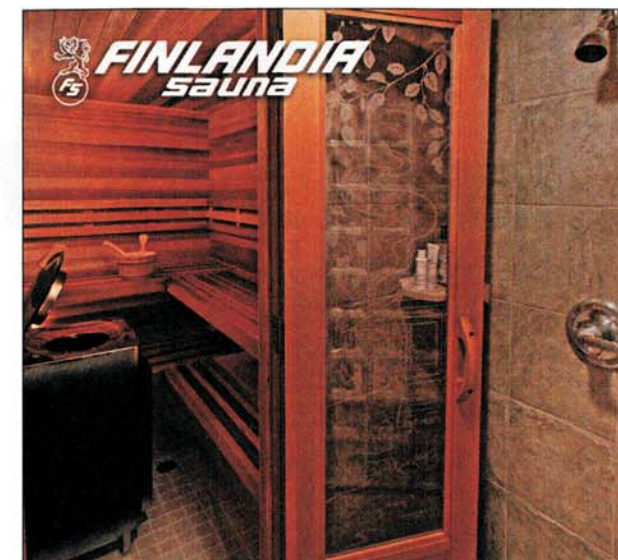
Solid surface makers have taken steps to eat into some of the laminate market, holding 16 percent at the end of 2002. Samsung's Staron really plays into the maintenance fears of consumers by spelling out the problems with granite, tile or laminates in brochures and showing consumers why its material is superior. Others like Avonite Surface's Studio Collection is trying to grab the homeowners that are really looking to break away from conformity and want a unique look.

"There is still a strong call for solid surfacing," says Reinke. "Now that solid surfacing and granite are pricing about the same they are going to have to do something to keep up in the future."

Another material seen more in kitchens is wood, as it makes it way back onto the cabinets in the form of countertops and butcher blocks. With residential remodels, wooden butcher blocks make up about 4 percent of the consumer surfacing choice, a material, it would seem, that isn't even considered in a new build. The use of wood is going beyond butcher blocks though, and companies like Grothouse Lumber & Fine Carpentry in Pennsylvania are adding patterns and shapes into their counters for a unique expression.

"Even though I see a lot of call for granite, I do sell my share of high-end wood tops," says Karas. "As everyone starts to use one certain material, I start to see more people going for something different."

Even though concrete is almost limitless in design ideas and surfacing areas, perhaps it is slow going in gaining acceptance and use in homes because of the way in which it must be assembled in the home. It takes specialized training and time to craft concrete surfaces, both of which many small busi-



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