

# countertops

WRITTEN BY JOHN LOECKE



## HOT PICK

Unlike other natural stones, Innovative Stone's new Everlife collection is worry free. It's protected by their proprietary PermaShield technology, a treatment that results in a low-maintenance, stain-resistant surface that never needs sealing. Available in 60 stone varieties. From \$63 per square foot installed. [everlifestone.com](http://everlifestone.com).

**K**itchen countertops must stand up to regular use and abuse—with style. There are many options, from tried-and-true laminate to natural stone, not to mention green choices, and understanding the pros and cons of each can help you decide which material is right for you. Here, a few things you should know to pick the perfect countertop surface for your kitchen.

## LAMINATE

Think of laminates as the “white appliances” of kitchen counters. They're economical—ready-made sections can be found at home centers for as little as \$20 per linear foot—and available in a wide range of colors and patterns that make matching other design

elements easy. They are made from a thin polymer layer that's bonded to a ¾-inch plywood or particleboard base. In better varieties, the color runs all the way through the top layer, helping to conceal any scratches that might appear. Manufacturers like Wilsonart, Formica and Nevamar have improved the fabrication process so today's laminates have a more realistic look and feel and can mimic the appearance of metal, wood and natural stone. One drawback: Undermount sinks aren't an option. “There's too big of a risk that water will find its way under the counter and damage the wood,” explains Ron Gagnon, vice president of design and marketing at Wilsonart. Cost: \$15 to \$50 per square foot installed.

## SOLID SURFACE

Variety in color and texture (it can take on the appearance of natural stone) is the real attraction with solid-surface countertops, says Alan Hubbell, new construction marketing manager for DuPont Corian, a leader in the solid-surface category. Flexibility is another. The material, an acrylic or modified polyester resin, can be cut to just about any shape and can even be molded into sinks that are seamlessly one with the countertop. The downside is that it scratches easily, so you shouldn't cut directly on it and it's also not heat resistant. That said, because the material is solid (there's no decorative top layer as with laminate) scorch marks, scratches and other defects can be sanded out or





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should be cleaned with hot water and a mild dish detergent. Avoid abrasive cleaners and products containing acid, such as lemon. Costs for stone counters can vary greatly depending on the quality, thickness and availability. Once you select a stone, the fabricator will measure and cut the stone and finish the edges to whatever profile you've selected. Cost: \$30 to \$150 per square foot installed. Granite, one of the more popular natural stone offerings, typically falls in the \$70 to \$100 per square foot range.

### ENGINEERED STONE

Made of a quartz-composite mixed with colored pebbles, polymers and epoxy, engineered stone countertops (think brand names like Silestone, Zodiaq, CaesarStone and Cambria) mimic the look of natural granite, marble and other stone surfaces. But unlike their quarried cousins, engineered stone countertops are not only stain- and scratch-resistant,

they also stand up against hot pans and acids. "It's a good choice for homeowners who want the look of natural stone without any of the maintenance issues," says Peter Martin, director of marketing for Cambria, a Minnesota-based supplier of natural quartz surfaces. You should never have to replace an engineered stone top because of wear issues (it shouldn't crack or chip) and because the material is man-made, replacement matches are never a problem. Like countertops made from natural stone, engineered stone tops are cut from slabs of raw material and custom finished and installed. Cost: \$45 to \$95 per square foot installed.

### CONCRETE

Of all the countertop materials available today, concrete is the most versatile. "You can grind, polish, stamp or stain it," says Fu-Tung Cheng, a Berkeley, California-based designer known for his concrete creations. That's because concrete coun-

tertops are made to order. As with any countertop, the fabricator visits your home and makes a template, but that's where the similarities end. Once the template is made, the fabricator creates a form, then pours your top. Because it's custom made, it can be colored any shade or even embedded with stones, jewels, fossils—almost anything else you can think of. However, by the nature of its makeup, concrete is porous and stains easily. To protect it, it must be sealed regularly. At an inch-and-a-half thick, concrete weighs the same as granite, but (depending on the design) unlike granite or any other material, it can require major demolition to remove it. Concrete also tends to evoke a modern appearance that may not be appropriate for a very traditional setting. Cost: \$130-\$175 per square foot installed.

### METAL

If you go for the industrial look that a material like concrete imparts, but want something a little lower maintenance, metal may be a good option. The two main choices are stainless steel or copper. Stainless, a favorite in commercial kitchens thanks to its hygienic qualities (it's nonporous so bacteria won't grow) and ability to take a beating without losing its luster, has become more popular in homes in recent years. The downside: It will show fingerprints and smudges

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DuPont Corian has introduced the Terra Collection, 25 solid-surface countertop materials partly comprising pre-consumer recycled material. Color choices range from Granola, a richly textured mid-tone yellow to Willow, a cool neutral with a hint of green. Like all solid surfaces, they're easily renewed and repaired. \$40 to \$75 per square foot installed. 877-229-3935; [corian.com](http://corian.com).



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wood and make it split or crack. Wood also isn't heat resistant, so it's vulnerable to burns and scorching. Stock wood tops are typically 1½ inches thick and 25 inches deep, and come in lengths that increase by one-foot increments to 12 feet long. The only limitation on custom tops is availability. Brand names include John Boos, Craft-Art, Teragren and The Grothouse Lumber Company. Cost: \$45 to \$150 per square foot installed.

### NATURAL STONE

The most common types of stone for kitchen countertops are marble, slate, soapstone, limestone, travertine and granite. Understanding a stone's composition and vulnerabilities will ensure a long-lasting fit in your home. Granite, composed of quartz and feldspar, is resistant to scratches and many chemicals. Granite also has the distinction of being a hot news topic, thanks to reports in *The New York Times* and other national media linking the material to radon, a tasteless, odorless and colorless gas that is dangerous in large quantities. But is granite really a health threat? According to Guido Gliori, vice president of the Marble Institute of America, it's not. "We've been studying the connections between radon and granite for more than 20 years and have yet to find any conclusive evidence that indicates that granite countertops are a health threat," he says. "The truth is, radon comes from the earth itself and when found in an indoor environment the cause is more often than not the soil, sand or rock underneath the home." Of course Gliori acknowledges that consumers may still be concerned and suggests two measures: Have your home tested by a professional (you can find out more about this on the Environmental Protection Agency web site, [epa.gov](http://epa.gov)) and know



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Available in natural or caramelized colors, Teragren's Bamboo Parquet Butcher Block is a natural fit for eco-friendly kitchens. Available in 30x96-inch or 36x72-inch slabs, the furniture-grade butcher block is 25 percent harder than oak and 12 percent harder than maple. Teragren butcher block is also relatively low maintenance, requiring only occasional oiling to seal and protect the material. From \$22 to \$28 per square foot uninstalled. 800-929-6333; [teragren.com](http://teragren.com).

the origin of the stone you are having installed. "At present, none of the most common types of granite have tested positive for excessive radon emissions," he says. Marble, limestone and other "soft" stones are chemically more sensitive and will show wear. Marble can be etched by everyday acids such as citrus, vinegar and coffee, or stained by oils. With this in mind, Innovative Stone, a global natural stone supplier, fabricator and distributor, has introduced Everlife, a selection of granite, marble, quartz and soapstone countertops that have been treated with a proprietary stain-resistant treatment that penetrates the surface of the stone. Whether granite, marble, slate or any other natural stone, these countertops (including Everlife)





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For a striking, classic look that's also earth friendly, consider CaesarStone's new mini-collection of engineered stone made from recycled materials. Since it's made from CaesarStone's own scrap and waste material, the surface has all the same properties as its other surfaces. Mosaici is available in Carbone (shown) and Marrone (a rich brown). From \$70 to \$120 per square foot installed. 877-978-2789; [caesarstoneus.com](http://caesarstoneus.com).



repaired. Also, there's no such thing as a stock solid-surface top. Like natural and engineered stone, solid-surface tops are fabricated from slabs of raw material and must be professionally installed. Brand names include DuPont Corian, Avonite and Wilsonart. Cost: \$40 to \$75 per square foot installed.

### WOOD

Wood is the original counter material. Oak, maple, cherry, walnut, teak and mahogany are all hardwoods favored for countertop applications; many

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Looking for a laminate that evokes the beauty of natural stone? Wilsonart's Passage Series is a collection of five high-definition laminate designs that feature a natural, aged stone look. Color choices range from soft sand tones to rich, moody blues and grays. From \$25 per square foot installed. [wilsonart.com](http://wilsonart.com).

designers and homeowners mix species for an eclectic, lived-in look. A new entry, bamboo, is an eco-friendly material that can be 25 percent harder than oak and 12 percent harder than maple. Wood countertops are not sold as solid pieces, but as segments that are glued together, planed smooth and sealed. How the wood segments are arranged and which grain of wood is visible helps determine the look. One of the biggest myths of wood is that it's not sanitary and promotes the growth of bacteria, but in fact wood and bamboo are naturally resistant to bacteria, says Paola Rutledge, vice president of Teragren's panel and veneer division. Wood, regardless of species, does have disadvantages. It requires regular applications of oil to keep it from drying out. Spills need to be cleaned up quickly, as standing water or liquid will damage the



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