

# A Designer's Guide to Countertops

BY JAMIE GOLD

Style and use are the keys to choosing the right product for your kitchen







#### IN THIS MIDCENTURY SAN DIEGO KITCHEN

I designed with the architect-homeowner and a colleague, we used family-friendly engineered stone—also known as quartz—for the countertops. Its soft color and pebbly pattern coordinate handsomely with the floors' driftwood-gray finish, the glossy-white cabinets, and the oceanic touches throughout the surrounding spaces. The material evokes the nearby tide pools, where the family enjoys walking and which are visible from the adjacent living room.

**T**here is no one-size-fits-all countertop for every kitchen, just as there is no one-size-fits-all kitchen for every home. When I began working as a designer close to a decade ago, most clients came to me wanting granite countertops. They ogled the large island covered in granite that we had on display—where no one ever cooked, chopped vegetables, mixed drinks, did homework, worked on art projects, or cleaned up after dinner.

Looking rich and beautiful is easy if you never do a day's work. It's harder for countertops subjected to the rigors of a family's daily living, especially spills, splatters, and flying projectiles. I design kitchens with an approach I call "sensible style." Its first principle is that your kitchen needs to fit how you really live.

The second sensible-style principle is that your new kitchen should honor the home it's being installed in; this means that your new countertops should complement the overall style and materials of the areas that surround the kitchen, as well as those in the kitchen itself. I've seen too many homeowners—and even some industry pros—choose a countertop without considering its maintenance requirements, durability, material properties such as softness or porosity, warranty, or even the way a pattern might play against neighboring surfaces such as kitchen cabinetry and flooring. My goal here is to help you avoid making such design mistakes.

#### Establish a design process

Kitchen countertops should never be chosen on the basis of looks alone. First, consider the needs and the lifestyle of your family. Take into account habits and any physical limitations. Once you've done that, then you'll be ready to choose the type of material that will top your cabinets for the next 10 or 20 years.

The first elements to consider when choosing the look you want for your tops are the other major surfaces in the kitchen. I often start with the floor, which may extend beyond the kitchen and, in a remodel, may already be in place. Cabinets and appliances are also major aesthetic considerations. What is their color, style, and pattern? Is there just one cabinet finish to coordinate with, or several? (I keep a consistent top if the cabinet finishes vary.) How will the appliances look next to the tops? Is there too much contrast, or not enough?

Regardless of whether you pick color A or pattern B, you need to choose the type of material before the cabinetry design is completed. Your countertops may require special sink accommodations, or supports may need to be factored into the cabinet design and construction.

In many of the spaces I design from scratch, cabinets are chosen first, then countertops and appliances, then flooring, then wall coverings. Other designers start with flooring and work their way up to the counters. The order is less important than taking a holistic approach.

#### Matching the top to the use

Not all kitchens are used the same way. Some functionality issues I ask clients about include the type of food preparation and cooking they do on a regular basis. I ask how often they entertain, and if they do so formally or casually. I ask where in the kitchen they like to chop vegetables, trim meat, or mix drinks. I also want to know if they help children with homework in the kitchen, or bathe pets or babies, or fold laundry.

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# EIGHT GREAT COUNTERTOPS

## ENGINEERED STONE/QUARTZ

This is my go-to kitchen countertop, specified for more of my projects than any other material. It's durable; low maintenance; and heat-, stain-, and scratch-resistant. I tend toward solid neutral colors, and I love the new soft-matte finishes such as Silestone's Suede (pictured).

caesarstoneusa.com  
cambriausa.com  
silestoneusa.com

**Cost:** \$45 to \$75 per sq. ft.

## DEKTON

This is the newest entrant in the countertop marketplace and will be available at home centers at the end of the year. Dekton is a composite of three of my top countertop materials—quartz, glass, and porcelain—and it embodies their durability, heat resistance, scratch resistance, and low maintenance.

dekton.com

**Cost:** Projected to be \$65 to \$75 per sq. ft.

## WOOD

Warm and elegant, a wood top by a company such as Craft-Art (pictured) can add unsurpassed beauty to a kitchen. I adore the look of wood countertops—particularly walnut on painted cabinets in a traditional kitchen. I'm less enamored with wood in food-prep or cooking zones.

craft-art.com • glumber.com (Grothouse)  
jaaronwoodcountertops.com

**Cost:** \$40 to \$200 per sq. ft.

## SOLID-SURFACE ACRYLIC AND ACRYLIC BLENDS

Tops such as Avonite (pictured) have a soft, low-glare, easy-care surface ideal for aging-in-place kitchens. I also like the material's seamless appearance. This material does have a few downsides: It can be scratched or scorched easily, and it rarely succeeds at looking as good as natural materials. Also, its cost is comparable to that of granite or quartz.

avonitesurfaces.com (Avonite) • corian.com • staron.com

**Cost:** \$40 to \$75 per sq. ft.



### SLAB GLASS

Glass is extremely durable; it's heat- and damage-resistant with normal use. It's also a surface that can add exceptional drama to a kitchen, especially when it's underlit. Its major downside is cost, which puts it out of reach for projects that would use it for anything other than a small accent.

[thinkglass.com](http://thinkglass.com)

**Cost:** \$200 to \$400 per sq. ft.



### CONCRETE

Concrete is versatile and comes in virtually any color combination and pattern. Slab concrete, made by manufacturers such as the Concrete Collaborative (pictured) is nearly flawless in appearance. I like its industrial look for contemporary kitchens, but not its need for regular sealing.

[concrete-collaborative.com](http://concrete-collaborative.com)

[polycor.com](http://polycor.com) (KarmaStone)

**Poured-concrete cost:**

\$65 to \$135 per sq. ft.

(without customization)

**Slab-concrete cost:**

\$60 per sq. ft.



### PORCELAIN AND CERAMIC SLABS

Recently, I came across an Italian line, Iris (pictured), that looks like marble, but without its softness or porosity. There is also a new Iron Series from Spain's The Size. Like any porcelain or ceramic surface, these countertops are durable and low maintenance. You now also can have an integral sink in the same pattern if you'd like, but the only edge profile offered is a bevel.

[thesize.es](http://thesize.es) • [tpbbarcelona.com](http://tpbbarcelona.com) • [transceramica.com](http://transceramica.com) (Iris)

**Cost:** \$65 to \$85 per sq. ft.

### RECYCLED GLASS

Recycled-glass countertops by companies such as Vetrazzo (pictured) are made from bottles, windows, and other castoffs blended with cement to create smooth slabs with fun backstories. Because most of it needs to be sealed, I like this dramatic material as a focal-point countertop away from food-prep or cooking zones.

[eos-surfaces.com](http://eos-surfaces.com) (GEOS) • [icestoneusa.com](http://icestoneusa.com) • [vetrazzo.com](http://vetrazzo.com)

**Cost:** \$75 to \$155 per sq. ft.



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It's also important to ask user-oriented questions. For instance, does anyone who uses the kitchen have reduced vision, a balance impairment, or a memory limitation?

Homes with seniors can benefit from an acrylic or acrylic-blend countertop such as Corian or Avonite. These surfaces feel softer when struck by someone with depth-perception or balance problems, and they are repairable if a shaking hand with a knife misses the cutting board or a memory-challenged user sets a hot pot down on the bare surface. These materials are also nonporous, which reduces the risk of food contamination, and they are maintenance-free.

Because of its durability, low maintenance, and stain resistance, I often specify engineered stone for families with active children. An acrylic material can fit the bill, too, given its reparability. Porcelain and ceramic-slab tops are also good family-friendly alternatives for their durability and minimal maintenance demands.

### **Create a cohesive style**

Kitchens tend to fall into one of four primary styles: traditional, contemporary or modern, transitional, and eclectic. Transitional kitchens are my favorite, as they blend many of the classic elements of traditional kitchens, such as crown molding and decorative hardware, with the simpler aesthetic of modern kitchens, such as simple hardware and streamlined, nonfussy door styles.

The countertop you choose should fit the overall style of the space. For example, wood can be butcher block for a casual transitional kitchen's food-prep area, or it can be elegant planks for a more formal buffet. Glass can be a slab for a contemporary cooking zone, or it can be a recycled blend for an eclectic focal-point bar. Metal options include zinc or copper for a traditional space, or stainless steel for a contemporary kitchen with next to no upkeep. Stone, such as marble, soapstone, or granite, is common for a traditional home whose owners don't mind the extra care. Quartz can be a good choice for the working surfaces of just about any style of kitchen, given the wide range of solids and patterns available. Finally, there's concrete, which can be poured or installed as a slab.

You also need to choose the right color, finish, and pattern to work with your kitchen's overall style and adjacent materials. I like to pull a dominant color from the floor for the countertop or go with a pattern or solid that will complement it. If everything's a focal point, nothing's a focal point.

Kitchens with high-gloss, solid-colored cabinets—white is popular—pair well with either low-sheen or textured tops. If the floor is glossy concrete or terrazzo, I opt for a top with some texture, such as a linen-look porcelain slab, to make the space feel less slick. If the floor is wood or bamboo, a solid-colored or lightly patterned quartz works well.

You have more choices than ever in today's marketplace, including old favorites such as wood and stone, and newer materials such as engineered stone, porcelain and ceramic slab, and concrete. If you start your decision-making process from the standpoint of what works for how you live, whom you live with, and what you live in, rather than which online image you loved last week, your countertop choice is more likely to serve you well in the long run. □

Jamie Gold, CKD, CAPS, is a kitchen designer in San Diego. Photos by Rodney Diaz, except where noted.



**Matching surfaces.** The wood counter on the kitchen's buffet closely resembles the color and tone of the wood flooring throughout the kitchen and adjoining spaces. This countertop helps connect the kitchen to the rest of the house and is a suitable material for a space that will not have to withstand the abuse of a hardworking prep space.

Photos this page and facing page: Greg Riegler



**THIS TRADITIONAL KITCHEN ON FLORIDA'S GULF COAST** has black-granite countertops that complement the painted white cabinets and that let the warm, rich floors and festive backsplash be the stars of the room. The buffet that separates the kitchen from the butler's pantry features a walnut top that pulls its deep brown tones from the floor and helps to reinforce the traditional style of the kitchen.



**Classic contrast.** The black-granite countertops on the working side of the kitchen are offset by white cabinets and bright-blue backsplash tiles. The tops were selected for their durability and subtleness.