



Tile outlines and defines kitchen spaces. A tile border gives the island in this kitchen designed by Tim Quigley of Minneapolis, Minnesota, its own separate visual space. The backsplash behind the stove forms a functional accent.

Putting Tile to Work in the Kitchen

The right tile in the right place can make or break the look as well as the function of your kitchen

BY LANE MEEHAN

Our black Lab, Bogey, is a walking mud factory and sheds so much that he should be bald. When it came time to choose tile for our kitchen floor, we looked for tile that would help to disguise evidence of Bogey and our three active boys. We chose a tile that looks like stone, but in a color and finish that could hide dirt and dog hair until I had a spare moment to run the vacuum.

Our choice was based primarily on ease of maintenance, just one consideration when choosing kitchen tile. As a tile-store owner with a background in design, I field questions all the time about incorporating tile into clients' kitchens. This article addresses the questions I am asked most frequently.

What types of tile can I choose from?

The two most basic categories of tile are stone and ceramic. Stone tile is a natural product, mined or quarried directly from the earth. The three most common stones used for tile are granite, marble and limestone, granite being the hardest.

Stone in its natural state is porous, so wherever it's used in a kitchen, it must be sealed to resist staining and discoloration. Stone tile has color all the way through, so deep scratches won't expose a different base color. However, a highly polished surface on a stone tile seems to accentuate even the smallest scratches. Stone can be installed on floors, countertops or backsplashes, but it does tend to be a high-maintenance product.

On the other hand, ceramic tile is made from clay rolled flat and either sun-baked or fired in a kiln. There are hundreds of differ-

ent clays, each with its own characteristics that can vary the tile's performance. Color is applied to ceramic tile in the form of baked-on glazes that also seal the tile.

In the past, ceramic-tile finishes had problems standing up to heavy use and abuse, but with recent technical advances, ceramic tile now performs better than it used to. With most ceramic tile, the color is just on the surface, so deep scratches expose the clay below.

Porcelain is another man-made tile product. Porcelain is much denser than ordinary ceramic, making it harder to scratch and break. But as with stone, the shinier the surface of ceramic or porcelain, the more scratches will show. So I try not to use high-gloss tiles anywhere in a kitchen except on backsplashes, areas that are less susceptible to scratching. In the past, porcelain has been more expensive than ceramic, but improvements in technology have reduced the price.

Beyond the amount of gloss, tile finishes can vary greatly. Tile finishes are graded by their ability to resist wear due to traffic; a light-industrial tile has a higher durability rating than most residential-grade tiles. Industrial-rated tile is a bit more expensive, but the extra cost makes sense if your kitchen resembles a freeway. In addition to a durability rating, the Tile Council of America (864-646-8453) gives tile a coefficient of friction (COF) rating indicating how slippery the surface will be underfoot. But if the tile feels too smooth or too slick to the touch, it will probably be too slippery to use on the floor.

Lifestyle and lighting affect choices

The first thing I ask clients about is their family, their lifestyle and the way their





Tile can act as a dimmer switch. This kitchen gets lots of light from two sides. The natural colors and matte finish of the tumbled-marble countertop and backsplash help to soften the light and cut down on glare in a kitchen with a lot of windows.



No time for cleaning? For busy, active families with kids and pets, consider a tile floor with a lot of color variations such as this stone look-alike. It stays better looking longer between cleanings.

kitchen is going to be used. For example, for a client who has a large family or who does a lot of entertaining, the kitchen is a busy hub with a casual atmosphere. For this kitchen, I might suggest warm-colored tile with perhaps a softer stone look.

After the client's lifestyle, I look at the type of lighting in the kitchen. If it is blessed with a great deal of natural light from windows or skylights, tumbled marble tile or tile with a matte finish will absorb light and create a softer look (photo above). A textured surface on the tile softens the effect even further.

On the other hand, tile with a glossy finish reflects light and helps to brighten areas of a kitchen that are dimly lighted or that receive little or no natural light. Remember that glossy tile used in a kitchen with a lot of light, either natural or artificial, requires more frequent cleaning because fingerprints or water spots tend to show up more.

When choosing tile, I also look at the color and finish of the cabinets and countertops. If the counters and cabinets have a matte or satin finish, then I try to keep the same feel in the floors and the backsplash. By the same token, if the kitchen has the

polished, streamlined look of many contemporary kitchens, I suggest a straightforward tile pattern with a glossy finish.

Tile color can make a large contribution toward a warm or cool feel in a kitchen. The earthy tones of limestone or tumbled marble are the warmest of the tile colors, while bright whites and blues tend to be quite cool. But even cool colors can be warmed with colored grout. For example, an ivory or off-white grout color can take the cool edge off bright white. The reverse can be true if you're trying to achieve a formal or industrial feel with gray or blue tile. A steel-gray grout helps to create a crisp, cool look.

Will my three boys and the family dog hurt my tile floor?

A client's lifestyle has the biggest bearing on the choice of floor tile. If you'd rather spend time with your three growing boys than taking care of your kitchen floor, then I suggest tile that hides a multitude of sins (and dirt) and always seem to look nice, such as a ceramic-stone look-alike (photo left). A quick vacuum and an occasional mopping, and you're off and running.



TILE PATTERNS AT WORK



The right pattern can make a kitchen look wider. Floor tile installed in a straight pattern makes a narrow room seem narrower (drawing left) while tile in a diagonal pattern softens the tunnel effect of a long, narrow kitchen, making it seem wider (drawing right).

If cooking and entertaining are big parts of your life, then I'd suggest tile that won't stain if hot grease and oil or an occasional glass of wine is spilled on it. A glazed ceramic tile works best in this situation, but for an old-world look, you can use a real stone, such as limestone. If you select a stone-tile floor, be sure to treat it with a good sealer according to the manufacturer's directions. We recommend either Miracle Sealants Porous Plus (800-350-1901) or One Master Marble and Stone Care's Gold Shield (800-254-7166) for sealing stone tile.

No matter what tile you choose for your kitchen floor, the grout should also be sealed. To make the grout more impervious to spills and stains, I recommend starting with a latex-modified grout or one that is mixed with a latex additive instead of water. Once the grout has cured properly, a sealer such as Miracle Sealants Porous Plus will fight off most food incursions. Another grout option is epoxy, which is stain resistant and does not require sealing. But because epoxy is harder to work with for the installer, we generally use it for smaller areas, such as countertops. With some tile, such as limestone, epoxy

grout is not recommended, so be sure to check with manufacturers' suggestions.

How does a tile floor relate to adjacent rooms?

The kitchen-floor tile should help to establish a visual flow into the surrounding areas, so I ask clients about the colors and materials on the floors of the rooms that are adjoining the kitchen. For example, if the kitchen floor joins up with a dark wood floor in the dining room, consider using tile with a warm, medium color to cut down on the visual contrast between rooms. If the kitchen floor meets colored carpet in an adjacent room, keep in mind that you'll probably change the carpet at some point, so choose a neutral tile color that will go with future carpet choices.

Tile thickness is another consideration. Whether the kitchen floor butts up against other existing tile, hardwood floors or carpet, the tile installer will need to install some sort of threshold to create a clean transition into the next room. Tile thickness can also affect doors that swing into the kitchen, as well as appliances such as dishwashers or trash com-

ponents that have to fit under the countertops in a kitchen.

Can tile make my tiny kitchen look bigger?

Tile layout can have a big impact on a room's appearance. While a parallel or straight pattern can intensify the narrowness of a kitchen, a diagonal tile pattern makes a room look wider (drawings above).

Tile size can also affect the appearance of the room. The smaller the tile, the busier the grout-joint pattern. The simple grout-joint pattern you get with larger 10-in. to 12-in. tiles can make a small room look larger. Smaller 4-in. to 6-in. tiles on a floor can have the opposite effect, creating a mosaic pattern or giving the floor a cobblestone look.

Clipping the corners of square tiles creates hexagons or octagons with small square spaces left between. The small tiles (called dots) that fill the spaces can introduce a dash of color to the floor in a pattern that breaks up the simple straight lines of square tile.

Irregular tile patterns such as block random (using three sizes of tile) or a pinwheel pattern can help to unify a kitchen that has many



Handmade tile is pretty but uneven.

The irregular surface of handmade ceramic tile is a challenge to work on and can be hazardous to wine glasses. Cutting boards should always be used on tile countertops.

entrances and exits. These patterns also work well to blend together tile that is highly varied in color. A tile border on the floor can make a kitchen look cozier by bringing the eye in or by creating a frame around the kitchen table or an island (photo p. 78). For more detailed advice on using tile patterns, see "Drawing Board" on p. 28.

Is tile okay for a kitchen countertop?

Granite-slab countertops have long been popular in high-end kitchens. Tile countertops both ceramic and stone have some of the same attributes as slabs, such as durability and heat resistance, but at less than half the cost, depending on the tile you choose.

Granite tile can be installed with tight grout joints to give the impression of a solid slab. And with granite tile, it's easy to add a border to accent or complement the color of the stone. One drawback to stone tile on a countertop is the edges. Although you can round over the edges, granite tile is thinner than a solid slab (3/8 in. to 1/2 in. compared with 1 1/4 in., normal thickness for a granite slab), so it's tougher to get the same full-slab look. Another drawback is not being able to install an undermount sink with granite tile.

Although the tight grout joints of granite tile create a good, smooth work surface, ma-

chine-made ceramic tile with standard grout joints makes a slightly rougher work surface. Handmade tile is usually installed with wider grout joints that are charming, but its inherently bumpy surface can be difficult to work on and can cause wine glasses or bowls to tip over (photos above left).

The edges of a tile countertop can be addressed in various ways. Continuing the tile over the edge gives the countertop a thick look. Relief tile, such as a rope pattern, can turn countertop edges into a visual focal point. Wooden edges that match or complement cabinets are also popular (photo above left).

As on floors, borders on countertops can add decoration. But if it's used in too large an area or if a lot of items are stored on the counter, a border can be lost or distracting.

Tile can also be combined with other types of surfaces for a dramatic look (top photo p. 80). For instance, the savings from tiling most of the countertop might leave enough money for a solid slab of granite in the sink area for an undermount sink. A stone slab or a wood surface on only the island could make a bold statement while providing a smooth surface for an informal eating area.

Can tile be used as a cutting board?

Although few tile or stone surfaces can stand up to a sharp kitchen knife, most hold up



TILE ART AND ACCENTS

The backsplash of cows in a pasture (left) in this kitchen designed by Randy Fritz of Lakeside, California, combines the art of Roger Dunham of Petaluma, California, with the practicality of ceramic tile. Random decorative tiles in a backsplash of less expensive, machine-made tile (below) give this kitchen a colorful accent.



well under other kitchen rigors such as abuse from pots and pans. Limestone scratches easily, but those scratches can be sanded out. Surfaces such as glossy tile or highly polished granite tend to show marks more readily, and their scratches are harder to remove or cover up. Stone or ceramic tile with a matte finish tends to hide scratches and surface abrasions better.

Stone tile is also porous, so it has to be sealed properly to resist staining from things such as red wine and grease. And some ceramic tiles as well as polished stone such as granite or marble can lose their shine when exposed to some food acids.

As in floors, latex-modified grout should be used on tiled countertops along with a good coat of grout sealer. Again, epoxy grout, which costs a little more and is a little harder to install, will make the grout impenetrable.

Should the backsplash blend or make a splash?

A tile backsplash is the spot where you can be really creative with tile in the kitchen (photo above left). Because a backsplash functions to protect the wall from splashes and splatters that come from cooking and preparing food, the only prerequisite is that backsplash tile be easy to keep clean. Beyond that, the choices become mainly aesthetic.

I always ask clients how much stuff they plan to keep on their countertops. Toasters, microwaves and canisters tend to block the backsplash, and in that case, the backsplash just provides a backdrop of color and texture. I usually recommend extending the tile from the countertop all the way to the bottoms of the wall cabinets so that the backsplash acts as a visual connection between the upper and lower cabinets.

Borders usually work best above long stretches of counter that are uninterrupted by windows or appliances. And when installed three-quarters of the way up the backsplash, a border won't get lost near the countertop or under the wall cabinets. At that height, a border will usually clear the height of the toaster or a bowl of fruit for a continuous line.

If the client is thinking of having decorative tiles scattered randomly throughout the backsplash, I suggest taping playing cards to the wall at random to see if the effect works in that particular kitchen. Playing cards can also be used in a line to test the visual power of a border.

Isn't tile expensive?

Tile varies greatly in price, and budget is a concern for the vast majority of my clients. So here's my strategy for keeping costs

down. First, use reasonably priced machine-made tile for large areas in the kitchen. Then there will be money left for those hand-made borders, small murals or strategically placed accent tiles that will give your kitchen a rich look without breaking the bank (photo above right).

Installation prices can vary greatly depending on the type of tile, the layout and the conditions of the existing floors and walls. A tile installer can explain what your options are and how much each option costs. Even if you opt for a less expensive installation, always seal the tile. Sealing tile is pretty easy, so you can save a little by doing it yourself. Spend some money on a good sealer.

For good ceramic floor tile, expect to pay between \$2.85 and \$5.50 per sq. ft. Above \$5.50 per sq. ft., the market really explodes, and there is a huge range of floor tiles to choose from. Wall tiles start at around \$2.50 per sq. ft. Installation prices vary around the country, but here on Cape Cod, installing ceramic tile costs \$4 to \$5 per sq. ft. on top of the price of the tile. □

When she's not taking her three sons to karate practice, Lane Meehan and her husband, Tom, own and manage Cape Cod Tileworks in Harwich, Massachusetts. Photos by Roe A. Osborn, except where noted.