

# Countertops

With the possible exception of cabinetry, no single material choice will have as great an impact on the look and functionality of your kitchen as your choice of countertop. And with the wide array of options available today, it pays to do your homework. To help you make comparisons in terms of durability, price, and other considerations, here are the basics on seven common categories of kitchen countertops. Looking for something more exotic? Check out “Amazing Countertops” on p. 51.

*Fine Homebuilding* contributing editor Scott Gibson and associate editor Rob Yagid contributed to this article.



## PLASTIC LAMINATE

The old standby still rules

High-pressure laminate is the choice in three-quarters of all new kitchens. In sheet form, laminate is glued to a particleboard substrate on site or in the shop; a thinner version is manufactured into a ready-made countertop with a rounded front edge and an integral backsplash, known as a post-formed counter. Laminate sheets (12 ft. long and 5 ft. wide) come in many colors and patterns (including ones that mimic wood and stone) for about \$2 per sq. ft. Post-formed counters are about \$5 per sq. ft. Available in fewer colors, they are for straight runs only (no curves).

Laminate is highly stain resistant, but heat and sharp knives can damage it, and water that gets into seams can degrade the substrate. New edge treatments have eliminated an aesthetic weakness, though: the dark line where the top of the counter meets the front edge.

**PROS:** Inexpensive, relatively durable, easy to clean, needs no regular maintenance, wide range of colors and patterns available.

**CONS:** Damaged by sharp objects and heat, not repairable.

**COST:** Uninstalled, \$5 per sq. ft. for post-formed counters; \$2 per sq. ft. for laminate sheet. Installed, \$8 to \$11 for post-formed; \$10 to \$17 for laminate sheet.

### SOURCES

**FORMICA**  
[www.formica.com](http://www.formica.com)  
**NEVAMAR**  
[www.nevamar.com](http://www.nevamar.com)  
**WILSONART**  
[www.wilsonart.com](http://www.wilsonart.com)



## BUTCHER BLOCK

Built-in cutting boards



Butcher block is one of the few totally natural countertop materials. Made from strips of hard maple, 1½-in.-thick butcher-block counters are glued up to expose wear-resistant edge grain. Sizes up to 12 ft. long and 4 ft. wide cost about \$30 to \$35 per sq. ft. Butcher block can be ordered through lumberyards, home centers, and a few large manufacturers. One of them, John Boos & Company, also makes end-grain tops, 4 in. thick, in sizes up to 60 in. by 38 in. for about \$100 per sq. ft. Butcher block is easy to install, has a pleasing resilience, and can be used as a cutting board. Scratches and scorch marks can be counted as character, or scraped and sanded away. One drawback is that

wood is susceptible to water damage, so butcher block around a sink should be sealed carefully.

**PROS:** Resilient, easy to work, relatively durable, can be used as a cutting board, surface can be repaired.

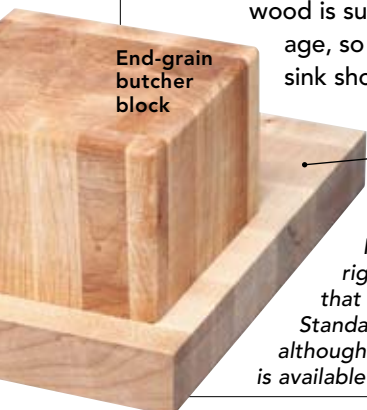
**CONS:** Will scorch, not as easy to keep clean as some other materials, can stain if unsealed, susceptible to moisture damage around sinks.

**COST:** \$30 to \$100 per sq. ft., uninstalled.

### SOURCES

**THE HARDWOOD LUMBER CO.**  
[www.hardwood-lumber.com](http://www.hardwood-lumber.com)

**JOHN BOOS & CO.**  
[www.johnboos.com](http://www.johnboos.com)



End-grain butcher block

Edge-grain butcher block

**Chop where you like.** Maple butcher block (above right) exudes a visual warmth that many other materials lack. Standard thickness is 1½ in., although 4-in.-thick end-grain block is available (left).



Granite

**PROS:** Wide variety of colors and textures, heat resistant, very durable (stain and scratch resistances vary).

**CONS:** High cost, some types can stain, slab size can be limited. Slate can delaminate.

**COST:** \$50 to \$100+ per sq. ft., fabricated and installed.

### SOURCES

**CAMBRIA**  
[www.cambriausa.com](http://www.cambriausa.com)

**DuPONT ZODIAQ**  
[www.zodiaq.com](http://www.zodiaq.com)

**FRESHWATER STONE**  
[www.freshwaterstone.com](http://www.freshwaterstone.com)

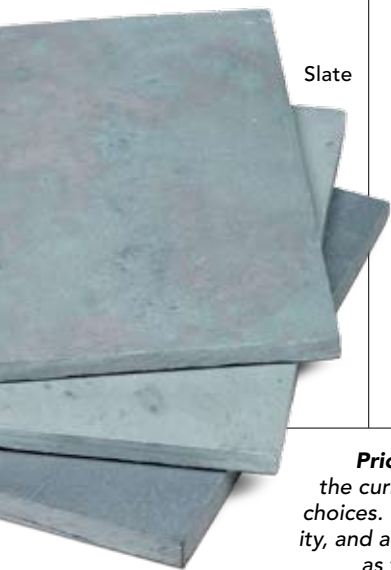
**SILESTONE**  
[www.silestoneusa.com](http://www.silestoneusa.com)

**VERMONT SOAPSTONE CO.**  
[www.vermontsoapstone.com](http://www.vermontsoapstone.com)

**VERMONT STRUCTURAL SLATE CO.**  
[www.vermontstructuralslate.com](http://www.vermontstructuralslate.com)



Soapstone



Slate

## STONE AND COMPOSITE

Durable, heat resistant, and popular

Slab stone, especially granite, is cold to the touch, heavy, hard to work, and expensive. It's also popular. Granite comes from all over the world, in a variety of colors and patterns. Prices show big regional differences, starting at \$40 to \$50 per sq. ft. (possibly lower in some areas) and commonly running to \$80 to \$100 per sq. ft. installed.

Sold in two thicknesses ( $\frac{3}{4}$  in. and  $1\frac{1}{4}$  in.), granite is resistant to heat and scratches. Most countertop material is polished, but it also is available in a honed (matte) finish, usually for a bit more money. Slab size usually is limited to 10 ft. long and 5 ft. wide.

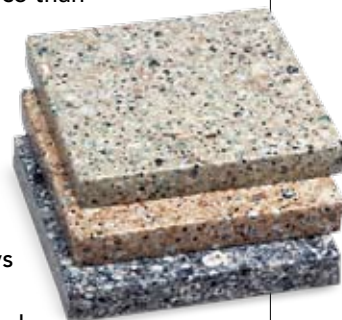
Although resistant to acidic foods such as lemon juice, granite will stain. It's especially susceptible to oil. Penetrating sealers, commonly called impregnators, can keep out oil and water.

Other stone-countertop options include slate and soapstone. Both come in smaller slab sizes than granite (roughly 6 ft. long and between 30 in. and 40 in. wide) and in not nearly the variety of colors. Prices for these two stone countertops are similar, from \$70 to \$100 per sq. ft., not including installation or shipping.

Blue-gray and lightly variegated when newly installed, soapstone oxidizes and darkens with time to a rich charcoal. It is extremely dense, with better stain resistance than granite. However, soapstone also is soft. It usually is treated with mineral oil; scratches can be sanded out.

Slate runs in a wider but still limited color palette: blacks, greens, reds, grays, and muted purples. Like soapstone, slate is relatively soft, although scratch marks can be buffed out with fine steel wool, says Daphne Markcrow of Vermont Structural Slate Company. Vermont slate needs no sealers, she says, and no maintenance, although slate mined in different regions might be more absorptive. Slate is formed in layers, so it might occasionally delaminate.

Quartz composite is another option. A combination of quartz, resin binders, and pigments, the countertop material (sold under the Silestone and Zodiaq brands) is nonporous and stain resistant. Unlike granite, it doesn't need to be sealed.



Silestone quartz composite

**Pricey but in high demand.** Natural stone is the current favorite among high-end countertop choices. It offers high heat resistance and durability, and a wide variety of colors and textures, such as this red-slate bar top with a honed finish.







## STAINLESS STEEL

The pros like it for a reason

Boston architect Ann Finnerty chose a combination of stainless steel and maple butcher block when she redid her own kitchen. "I wanted a material that was common and not too precious and not too expensive," she says. She likes the fact that stainless steel is easy to clean: "When it's new especially, fingerprints show up like crazy." That problem fades as the surface gets more wear and develops a patina.

Stainless steel can't be modified easily on site. Countertops usually are fabricated from templates, often in 16-ga. material. Sheet metal is glued to a substrate of medium-density fiberboard (MDF); sinks can be welded in. The counters cost from \$80 to \$100 per sq. ft., but edge details, sinks, and overall complexity can change prices dramatically. Mark Ponder, an estimator at Weiss Sheet Metal, which made Finnerty's counters, cautions that prices can be misleading. A plain 10-ft.-long counter with a simple sink and a 4-in. backsplash might cost \$1650, he says, but that doesn't include the substrate, shipping, or installation. Linda Bergling of Stainless Steel Kitchens, a large Midwestern fabricator, says her shop charges about \$195 per running foot of counter with backsplash. The stainless is already laid up on a substrate, ready to go in.

Counters typically are made from 304 stainless with a #4 brushed finish. Length usually is limited to 10 ft. and width to 4 ft., although larger sheets can be ordered. Clean stainless-steel counters with a mild detergent, or with baking soda or vinegar diluted in water. Some foods—mustard, mayonnaise, lemon juice, ketchup—can cause a white surface discoloration; rub it out with a fine Scotch-Brite pad.

**Bring the restaurant home.** Stainless steel, long a fixture in commercial kitchens, is making gains in residential kitchens for the same reasons: long life and low maintenance.

**PROS:** Nonporous and nonstaining, resistant to heat, durable, easy to clean.

**CONS:** High cost, can dent.

**COST:** \$80 to \$100 per sq. ft. for uninstalled straight runs.

### SOURCES

**BROOKS CUSTOM**  
[www.brookscustom.com](http://www.brookscustom.com)

**FRIGO DESIGN**  
[www.frigodesign.com](http://www.frigodesign.com)

**STAINLESS STEEL KITCHENS**  
[www.stainlesssteelkitchen.com](http://www.stainlesssteelkitchen.com)

## TILE

Design flexibility and durability at a low cost

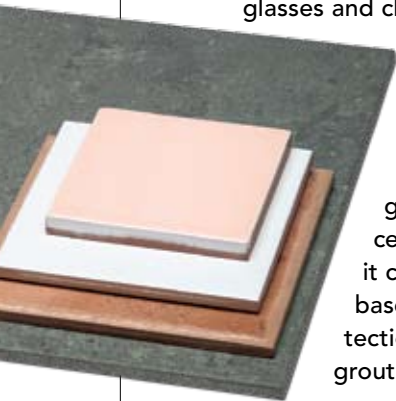
Because it is easy to cut, tile can be formed into counters of almost any shape and size. Ceramic tile is available in a huge variety of colors, patterns, textures, and prices, from mass-produced 4-in.-sq. field tile to hand-painted gems. Installed prices start at about \$18 per sq. ft. for a basic counter. Loose field tile starts at about \$2.50 per sq. ft.

Glazed ceramic and porcelain tiles have a glasslike outer layer that makes them long-wearing, heat resistant, and nonabsorbent. The downside? Tile is really hard. Wine-

glasses and china won't fare well in careless households, and the tile surface is unlikely to be perfectly flat.

You'll need to use cutting boards on the countertop.

The major shortcoming is the grout between tiles. Left untreated, cement-based grout stains easily, and it can be hard to keep clean. A water-based acrylic sealer offers some protection. The bottom line: A smaller grout joint means less maintenance.



**PROS:** Versatile, inexpensive, heat resistant, durable, high stain resistance.

**CONS:** Grout can stain, surface not perfectly flat.

**COST:** Materials, including substrate, adhesive, and border tile, \$7 and up per sq. ft. Installation adds \$8 to \$10 per sq. ft.

### SOURCES

**DALTILE**  
[www.daltileproducts.com](http://www.daltileproducts.com)

**NATIONAL TILE CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION**  
[www.tile-assn.com](http://www.tile-assn.com)

**TILE COUNCIL OF NORTH AMERICA**  
[www.tileusa.com](http://www.tileusa.com)



**Hard-wearing and heat resistant.** Ceramic tile, available in hundreds of colors and patterns, offers great design flexibility at a relatively low cost. Be careful, though: Grout stains easily.

## CONCRETE

High style, potentially high maintenance

From a design perspective, few countertop materials are as malleable as concrete. Cast upside down in molds or formed in place, concrete counters can be made in virtually any shape and thickness. Made correctly, they are hard, durable, and heat and scratch resistant. But even the best of them will stain if not assiduously maintained. Cast without proper reinforcement and the correct mix of materials, concrete counters have been known to develop severe cracks as they cure. Jeffrey Girard of The Concrete Counter Institute says that to minimize cracking, standard countertops 1½ in. to 2 in. thick should be cast with structural steel and polypropylene fibers.



Fabricators exert considerable control over the look of the finished product. Girard, for instance, adds pieces of glass and metal to the mix, then grinds the surface to create beautiful multicolored patterns.

**Not all concrete stains easily.** Those who don't fancy stains as patina can choose Sonoma's concrete counter tiles made with the company's proprietary stainless NuCrete.

**PROS:** Versatile, heat resistant, durable, colors and textures easily customized.

**CONS:** Can stain.

**COST:** Prices vary considerably, but expect to pay at least \$65 per sq. ft. to more than double that amount (shipping and installation extra).

### SOURCES

**BUDDY RHODES STUDIO INC.**  
[www.buddyrhodes.com](http://www.buddyrhodes.com)

**CHENG CONCRETE**  
[www.concreteexchange.com](http://www.concreteexchange.com)

**SONOMA CAST STONE**  
[www.sonomastone.com](http://www.sonomastone.com)

For a list of contractors:  
**CONCRETE NETWORK**  
[www.concretenetwork.com](http://www.concretenetwork.com)

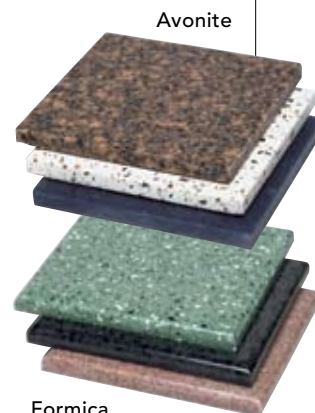
**Make your own.** Some manufacturers sell everything you need to make countertops, including specialty blended concrete, sink molds, and colorants.



## SOLID SURFACE

A 40-year-old wunderkind in the kitchen

DuPont's Corian, the world's first solid-surface material, now has many rivals. But they are essentially the same stuff: polyester or acrylic resin plus a mineral filler. Solid surfacing comes in plain colors, patterns that resemble stone, and translucent versions. Countertops most often are formed from ½-in.-thick sheets; edges are built-up layers of identical or contrasting material. Sheets 30 in. and 36 in. wide run to 12 ft. in length.



Solid surfacing is nearly an ideal countertop. Minor surface blemishes can be sanded out. The material is nonporous, making it easy to keep clean, and it's highly stain resistant. It also can be fashioned into a sink and then glued to a countertop for a seamless, leakproof installation. Solid surfacing comes with a long guarantee, usually 10 years.

**PROS:** Nonporous and nonstaining, easy to clean, repairable, durable, wide range of colors and patterns available, integral sinks possible.

**CONS:** High cost, should be protected from high heat and sharp knives.

**COST:** Typically installed by a certified fabricator, \$45 to \$80 per sq. ft.

### SOURCES

**AVONITE**  
[www.avonite.com](http://www.avonite.com)

**CORIAN**  
[www.corian.com](http://www.corian.com)

**FORMICA**  
[www.formica.com](http://www.formica.com)

**PIONITE**  
[www.pionite.com](http://www.pionite.com)

**SWANSTONE**  
[www.swanstone.com](http://www.swanstone.com)

**WILSONART**  
[www.wilsonart.com](http://www.wilsonart.com)