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THE FIX
TIM McKEOUGH



Counter Measures

PHOTOGRAPHS BY READ MAZURKIE

In the kitchen, they seem so elemental, and yet, decisions, decisions.

FOR SUCH A BASIC ELEMENT of the kitchen, why does the countertop cause so much consternation?

It's flat. Its job is simple: to provide a clean, even surface for food preparation and serving. Really, how difficult could it be to choose the right one? Fairly difficult, as it turns out.

Start with the price: Depending on the material, your counter is either a big investment or a very big one. Then there's the appearance: In the contemporary kitchen — increasingly the active heart of the home — the counter is a defining feature that telegraphs personality. Are you a reserved minimalist who prefers pure white Corian, or a more adventurous type who goes for wildly swirled Arabescato marble?

And what about maintenance? Some materials will stain and scratch more easily than others, which will bother some people more than others.

"The starting point is to understand how the space will really be used," said Andrew



In Palm Springs, Calif., above, Cristallo quartzite for faceted waterfall forms. In Nantucket, Mass., left, stainless steel for a chef.

Kotchen, a founding principal of Workshop/APD, a New York firm that has designed many kitchens for private homes and condominium developments. "We have clients who are chefs, and we have clients who only make coffee in their kitchens," he said, noting that different people have vastly different expectations about how their countertops will wear over time.

As for style, he said: "We don't choose a countertop in isolation. We think about how that material relates to the overall design of the home."

To complicate things further, he added, it's not just about choosing the right material. The way the material is fabricated into a countertop — with a particular finish, edge detail and seams — can drastically affect the look of a kitchen.

To simplify those decisions and sort through the various options, we asked Mr. Kotchen and other designers and material suppliers for some guidance.

Understand Your Materials

Counters can be made from a variety of materials, and there are advantages and disadvantages. CONTINUED ON PAGE 9

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THE FIX

Counter Measures: Decisions, Decisions

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vantages to all of them. Among the most popular at the moment are natural marble and engineered stone like Caesarsstone and Silestone, which are manufactured from quartz and resin (and often referred to simply as quartz).

"Everyone loves marble, and the aesthetic of marble is what everyone's chasing" with competing man-made products, said Jonathan Tibbett, an owner of ABC Stone in New York, which sells natural and engineered stone, among other materials. "Although marbles offer an incredible aesthetic, there are some vulnerabilities."

Specifically, "marble is calcium carbonate, and acids eat that calcium carbonate, which creates etching," he said, referring to the whitish haze permanently left behind by things like lemon juice and tomatoes. Marble is also relatively easy to scratch.

Engineered stone doesn't react to acids and is more resistant to scratching. The trade-off for people who prefer the look of natural stone, however, is that engineered materials have yet to achieve a comparable appearance, although manufacturers try.

"There really is no better-looking material than the original that's trying to be copied," said Evan Nussbaum, a vice president at Stone Source, a national material supplier headquartered in New York that sells natural and engineered stone, among other products.



ELIZABETH FELICELLA

Marble's susceptibility to acid and abrasion doesn't mean it's a bad choice, he said. Buyers just need to be aware that it will develop a patina over time — which might even be desirable.

"Natural stone will show wear and tear," said the New York architect Gil Schafer. But in many of his projects, he added, "patina is the name of the game and right in sync with the spirit of the house."

West Chin, another New York architect, likened the choice between natural and engineered stone to preferences in jeans. "There are people who want their dark denim jeans to always look dark," he said, similar to the pristine perfection of engineered stone. "If you like your jeans to wear and fade, there are other materials that will show you've lived in the house, and add character to the kitchen."

Consider Natural Alternatives to Marble

If you love the look of marble but are worried about etching, you might consider other kinds of natural stone, like quartzite (which is different than quartz-based engineered stone). Some varieties have "patterning that is similar to marble," Mr. Tibbett said, but are "resistant to acids and resistant to scratching."

If you prefer natural stone with a darker color, take a look at granite or soapstone, suggested Mr. Nussbaum, who advised against using black marble for a kitchen counter. With dark marble, "the acid etching is going to be way too visible, because etching is light in color," he said. With granite and soapstone, etching isn't a concern.

Soapstone is softer than many types of stone, he said, which means that it can be scratched fairly easily. But the upside of that softness is that "you can buff it out with a Scotch-Brite pad," for a quick repair.

Look at Other Options

Strong, impervious man-made materials — including large-scale porcelain slabs and sintered stone like Lapitec, Neolith and Dekton — are gaining favor as an alternative to quartz-based engineered stone.

Hardwearing, solid-surface materials like Corian remain popular, and can be used to create a countertop with a seamless look. Stainless steel and wood are also perennial favorites with designers, though both tend to show wear over time.

For a chef's house in Nantucket, Mass., Workshop/APD designed a kitchen around stainless-steel counters, "because it was the only material he wanted to have," Mr. Kotchen said. "It's extremely durable and very sanitary."

Steel does sometimes show scratches when new, he said, but "when you use it all the time, it gets a patina to it, and this 'worked' quality that is great."

Mr. Schafer has built kitchens with a wide range of counter materials: mahogany with a glossy, marine-grade finish; maple butcher block finished with mineral oil that's intended to develop character over time; and even antique wood that's pre-worn in areas from decades of cutting, for an intentional sense of age.

Still Can't Decide? Choose Several

There is no rule that says you must use a single material for all of your counters. Ar-



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chitects and designers often mix it up by using one material for the majority of the counters, a different material for the island, and yet another for the backsplash.

"Very often, we pick a nice-looking stone for the kitchen island, because that's where people will sit and touch the marble," Mr. Chin said. "Then, on the back counter, where we have the sink, dishwasher, stove-top, more grease and dirty dishes, we choose a more durable material."

In an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, he designed a kitchen with a Statuary marble island and a Corian counter along the wall behind it. For another apartment, in the Flatiron district, then installed black granite counters by the range and sink, and a backsplash of white Statuary marble.

For nervous homeowners, he said, "the backsplash is often the best place to put marble, because it's hard to spill on a vertical surface."

Plan the Details

After choosing the material — or materials — all you need to worry about are design and installation.

At the very least, you'll need to select a sink, faucet and any integrated appliances before the counter is fabricated, so it can be cut to accommodate them.

If you're using natural or engineered stone, you'll need to choose a finish for the counter. The most common options are honed (which creates a soft, matte look) and polished (a glossy look), although there are other, less common textured finishes available, including flamed and leathered. For marble, suppliers often recommend a honed finish, because it will help hide acid etching.

Slabs of material are usually sold in a three-quarter-inch or one-and-a-quarter-inch thickness (although thinner and thicker slabs are sometimes available, depending on the material). But they can be made to look much weightier.

One popular design detail is a waterfall edge, where the horizontal counter turns at one or both ends and runs all the way down to the floor.

Another is adding a mitered edge, where

the horizontal counter surface and a matching edge strip are cut at 45-degree angles and joined to give the material a thicker appearance. When done well, the result looks seamless and gives the impression that the counter is made from a solid block of material.

The New York architecture firm Messana O'Rourke frequently designs counters with mitered edges, because "we want to create a look of mass," said Brian Messana, a partner for a kitchen in Montecito, Calif., the architects designed counters with a two-and-a-half-inch-thick edge from three-quarter-inch-thick basaltina, he said. Messana O'Rourke has also used the technique to create thick stone shelves for the walls above the counters.

For a more traditional look, counters can be fabricated with a variety of shaped edges, from a simple, rounded bullnose to the more decorative ogee — or S-shaped — edge preferred by Mr. Schafer.

"When we use a three-quarter-inch countertop, we will often give a shape to it," he said. "Something like an ogee shape is a little dressier."

Have the Counters Fabricated and Installed

Once the design details are sorted out, it's time to have the counters fabricated and installed, a process that typically involves numerous players, because many suppliers only sell the raw material, and a separate fabricator is required to make the counters. Working with a designer or contractor who can help coordinate things is often helpful.

Decisions made at this stage in the process can also affect the finished look. With marble and other types of stone that have dramatic veining, there can be significant differences in appearance from slab to slab. When possible, you should choose the specific slabs that will be used to make your counters.

Similarly, some parts of an individual slab may be more appealing than others, and it's often possible to specify exactly where you want cuts made.

Mr. Tibbett suggested having a rendering of the kitchen created with the exact pieces of stone you plan to use, so you can see what they will look like before the material is cut.

ABC Stone keeps digital photos of every slab in its warehouse for this purpose.

Also consider whether seams will be required — some counters may need to be longer than an individual slab allows, or the counters may need to come in pieces so they can be maneuvered into the kitchen — and try to make sure they end up in unobtrusive places. (With solid surface materials like Corian, seams are rarely an issue, because they can be made imperceptible during installation.)

Wherever possible, try to go seamless. "If you can avoid seams, it's just that one extra little step of wonderful," said Mr. Schafer, who has gone so far as to hoist long counters through the windows of New York apartments to avoid making cuts.

Consider a Sealer

In general, "we recommend a sealer on all natural stone," said Mr. Nussbaum, of Stone Source. "Even on high-density materials, like granite and quartzite."

Man-made materials — including engineered stone, sintered stone, porcelain and solid surface — don't require a sealer, because they are already virtually nonporous.

Wooden butcher block and soapstone can also be left unsealed, but may benefit from the periodic application of mineral oil.

A variety of sealers are available, but the most common are penetrating or impregnating sealers from companies like Fila and Dry-Treat. "It penetrates into the material and just repels water and stains," Mr. Tibbett said, but "the ability to scratch it or etch it is still there."

Some companies offer products that coat stone to protect against staining as well as etching. But, "the thing about sealers that sit on the surface is that you have to spend a lot of time maintaining that sealer," Mr. Nussbaum said. "In my experience, there's no way to stop a marble from etching without creating other maintenance concerns. In many cases, it might be easier just to maintain the stone."

Or you could just allow the marble to show its age.

"I prefer patina, myself," Mr. Messana said. "And if worst comes to worst, you can always re-hone it, and it will look brand-new."