

## COUNTERTOP INTELLIGENCE

If a countertop can't stand the heat (or a mallet), maybe it should get out of the kitchen

# Money

By: Farley Urmston, excerpted: June 2006



A countertop is a fussy thing. Ideally it should be beautiful, adding character to an entire kitchen. It should be strong, able to endure the abuse of a sharp knife or a hot pot. And it should be easy to clean, even after a puddle of Merlot is left sitting overnight. Oh, and it should be affordable.

Granite's been the kitchen surface of choice in the past decade, but other materials have recently become more popular. Poured concrete, ceramic tile and butcher block are all gaining favor.

If you're in the market, start with some soul searching: Will you really take care of the sealant on a porous material like soapstone? Do you enjoy scrubbing grout between ceramic tiles? Do you prefer warm and cheery or sleek and modern?

Then do some wallet searching. Slab granite can cost \$150 a square foot, but 12-inch-by-12-inch granite tiles top out in the \$20 range. Want the rich appearance of natural wood? One dealer we spoke with sells teak for \$88 a square foot but also offers maple for \$30.

Aesthetics, of course, are subjective – wine stains and chipped corners, however, are not. To test the durability of six counter surfaces, we ordered factory samples and gave a good culinary beating to each one: We chopped vegetables on its surface, sans cutting board; we placed a hot pot on it to see if that would leave a burn mark; we left a dribble of wine on it overnight; and we scorched it with a small kitchen torch for 60 seconds (just a test; don't try that one at home).

In the end, was there a clear winner? Yes, but each material has its pluses and minuses – with a large variety of surfaces out there, it's just a matter of finding the one that works best for you.

**GRANITE.** This is a natural mined stone consisting of quartz and feldspar and cut with diamond blades. Despite an increasing interest in other high-end materials, granite's still a popular option.

- No two countertops are alike.
- When cared for properly, it'll last for ages.
- It's ideal for pastry rolling.
- Granite's porous; if the seal cracks, the stone stains easily.
- Granite's hard; don't slam dishes on it.
- Sprawling areas will have visible seams. Torch ruined the sealant. Hot pot was fine.

*Wine left a stain. Oil and juice can do the same. Chopping left no marks. \$60 to \$150 a square foot, installed. Exact cost will be determined by availability, texture and edging. Twenty-five year warranty.*

**SOLID SURFACE.** Durable synthetic sheets are formed by mixing a mineral compound with polyester and acrylic resin. Corian is a popular brand.

- It's easy to clean.
- Color is uniform.
- There are more than 100 colors, some more expensive than others (based on the manufacturing process).
- It's easier to seam than granite.
- The "softening" process to remove scratches is labor-intensive. Blowtorch damage could not be "softened."

*Wine didn't stain. Knife left scratches. \$45 to \$75 a square foot, installed. The simpler the job, the lower the price. As with most counters, fancy edge work will drive the price up. Ten-year warranty.*



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**CONCRETE.** Better looking than a sidewalk, this concrete is made of water, cement, sand, stone and a palette of powdered pigments (cobalt, green, speckled chocolate, mottled mushroom).

- There are rich color and texture possibilities (Concreteworks, the company that makes our sample, offers 18 colors and three textures).
- It can be cast into custom shapes (such as an integral sink).
- It's best to wax the surface once a month.
- Installation is more difficult than for other surfaces.
- Concrete requires strong base cabinets to carry the load. Torch left a scorched circle in the sealant.

*Wine didn't stain. Light chopping damaged the sealant. Around \$90 to \$100 a square foot for material. Installation costs \$40 to \$50 an hour. One-year warranty.*

**SOAPSTONE. MONEY's FIELD TEST WINNER.** A soft stone found in Finland, Brazil and along the Appalachian Trail (in Georgia and Vermont, especially).

- It's natural and nonporous (stain-resistant).
- No fussy, vulnerable sealants; scratches can be sanded and oiled away.
- You can get any color you want, so long as it's green or dark gray.
- Soapstone requires regular mineral oil treatments, mainly in the first year, to maintain finish.
- It stayed coolest under a hot pot. The torch left a black mark. Wine didn't stain.

*Knife left scratches. \$120 a square foot, installed. Self-installation is tricky. Lifetime warranty.*

**BUTCHER BLOCK.** Most often made of maple or oak, butcher block adds a natural element to a kitchen. It also works as an inset in stone or other surfaces for a fine-looking built-in chopping block.

- It's naturally bacteria-resistant (dead trees still carry antimicrobial agents).
- It's wood; it's easy to install and repair.
- Major stains and scratches can be sanded out.
- Water and humidity can warp it over time.
- Regular mineral oil treatments are needed to prevent drying out and warping.
- Scratches easily.

*Torch left a major burn, and a hot pot can leave a ring. Wine left a stain. Knife left scratches. From \$30 a square foot for basic maple to about \$88 a square foot for teak, plus \$40 an hour for installation. Cost-saving route: self-installation. One-year warranty.*

**CERAMIC TILE.** It's not just for backsplashes anymore. Clay tiles set in an epoxy grout (for a stronger hold) make for a bright, very affordable countertop.

- Tiles can be used to create unique mosaics.
- Do-it-yourself installation, which is quite doable, cuts costs considerably.
- Grout stains easily and must be constantly cleaned and periodically sealed.
- Tile can chip, crack or buckle.
- Cutting light-hued tiles upon installation discolors them slightly.

*It withstood the torch, and hot pots are fine. Wine didn't stain the tile – but it stained the grout. Knife didn't leave a mark. \$26 to \$100 a square foot, plus \$40 an hour for installation. Tiles can sell for as little as \$1 a square foot for do-it-yourselfers, but don't skimp on grout.*

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR.** Soapstone's kitchen-friendly characteristics make it tops in counters:

- It's stain-resistant, repelling both red wine and cooking oil.
- It's easy to clean and repair with some oiling and sanding.
- It's heat-resistant, so setting down a hot pot won't leave a mark.