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Current Issue

Past Issues

Advertising

FEATURES

- Classic Community
- Of Hearth and Home
- Home Furnishings (1) of (2)
- Golden Days
- Cabinet Conveniences
- Countertop Creations
- Completely Custom
- Radiant Rugs

DEPARTMENTS

- Up Close
- HomeAid
- Making the Sale
- Architectural Review
- Extreme Options

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Countertop Creations

Setting the kitchen apart with options from quartz to European tile.

By Kim Singletary



The kitchen counter is more than just a place to cut vegetables and lay out the ingredients for a recipe. Countertops are the centerpiece of a kitchen, a vein of color and style that flows through the room and can pull all the elements together, creating a distinct look and feel. Settling for the ordinary is difficult when today's marketplace is full of exciting ideas for transforming the kitchen surface into a visual masterpiece.

When it comes to countertops, one of the best materials to use is quartz. The standard in European kitchens for years, quartz has only recently trickled into American homes where solid surface countertops dominate the market. The structure of the quartz crystal once served as the model for the modern skyscraper, and is one of the most common minerals in the Earth's crust. Hundreds of variations are mined all over the world including in

Japan, where it was once believed that quartz formed from the breath of the mystical white dragon.

To the Japanese, quartz represented perfection. In the countertop industry, this is still true. For the same price as granite, quartz has none of the inherent defects and indentations. Caesarstone, the world's first in manufacturing quartz surfaces for consumer use, works around the globe gathering quartz from various mines to be prepared and polished in its factory in Israel. Made with 93 percent quartz, Caesarstone countertops combine extreme functionality with luxurious appeal, and its 38 designer styles provide a perfect match for any décor. Included in the color choices are six "honed" or matte finishes for those looking for something subtle. "We have the most advanced colors because we are one step ahead of everyone else," says Arik Tendler, general manager of Caesarstone.

No matter what beautiful colors are offered, no one wants to pay for a product that comes with inconvenient required maintenance or damages easily from everyday use. Granite is like a sponge, soaking up liquids like oil, and so it must go through an artificial sealing process that is repeated every six months to prevent stains. This is not so for quartz, which boasts zero porosity.

While being a thinner, lighter and more colorful material than granite, quartz is chip and scratch resistant, mold, mildew and burn resistant, and resistant to a range of usually damaging chemicals. It is the perfect material to handle any abuse your kitchen can dish out.

"People ask me 'Can I do this or that on my counter?'" Tendler says. "I say go ahead and cut your vegetables right on the surface. Throw some oil on them if you want to."

Closer to home, another well-known company has recently broken into the quartz business. Popular for its carpets and solid surfaces, DuPont began a slow release of its own Zodiac™ quartz surfaces in 2000. The quartz for the Zodiac line is mined in Canada, but the company is headquartered out of Wilmington, Del. DuPont, along with Caesarstone, backs its product with a 10-year warranty covering both the product and installation.

Its range of colors makes the Zodiac line distinct. The 19 shades available include three new celestial colors: Argo Green, Borealis Blue and Galaxy Black. With flecks of sparkling crystals, the new line promises "dazzling, out-of-this world" color to customize your kitchen. "What really sets Zodiac apart is the depth and radiance," explains Leigh Rodriguez, DuPont marketing associate. "It has that three dimensional quality to it."

Besides a range of colors, quartz countertops provide a great surface to pair with add-ons like a built-in butcher block or creative edgings, while the sink backsplash provides an additional realm of possibilities. Zodiac quartz surfaces are created to complement DuPont's Corian™ line of solid surfaces. The use of a different material can produce a varied look in the kitchen and provides a wider palette of colors.

Another new and innovative way to customize the backsplash is through a process called water jetting. A high-pressure hose is used to etch any design directly into quartz material – something not possible with granite. The possibilities are endless as any drawing can be re-created in AutoCAD and then programmed into the water jet machine. From there, the design is carved from water immersing through a very narrow tip at 55,000 pounds-per-square-inch. While powerful, this tool can be controlled to cut

completely through quartz slab, or as shallow as one-eighth of an inch.

The customizing possibilities are endless, from the family crest, to a peaceful landscape, to a portrait of the family pet. The water jetting technique was used in one luxury home to re-create the likeness of the homeowner's favorite sight, an oak tree in her front yard. The result was a highly personalized backsplash and a unique centerpiece for the kitchen. It is also possible to utilize additional colors in a custom carving. In this case, the water jet would cut the desired piece from the original quartz and epoxy in an identical piece from a different colored quartz slab.

Quartz slab isn't the only product that makes a good custom countertop; the rustic look of tile is making a comeback as a result of Old World feel and strength. Pour La Maison, based in Anaheim, Calif. has mastered the fine art of customizing this delicate product. They specialize in decorative mosaic medallions and borders. Made of natural stone and produced in the United States, artisans handcraft each stone tile.



The Handmold collection from Seneca Tiles is another great way to customize the kitchen. Seneca is the largest producer of authentic handmade tiles in the United States, and the recognized leader in rustic, glazed tiles. Located in Ohio, the birthplace of the ceramic tile industry, Seneca uses methods long abandoned with the advent of mass production, including the use of beehive kilns, some dating back as far as 1906. The Handmold line is just as the name implies, completely handmade. Each tile begins when semi-soft clay is pressed into a shallow wooden mold. Sand is used to prevent sticking. The tile is then dried, glazed and kiln fired under carefully controlled conditions. A labor intensive and skilled process, each tile becomes a work of art, as no two are alike.

"Tile offers design opportunities that are just not available with other products," says John Wittmann, director of sales for Seneca Tiles. "The Handmold series offers that old, used, casual look that many people are looking for."

Seneca Handmold tiles are offered in 27 colors and numerous sizes and shapes, ranging from triangles and squares to hexagons and pentagons. One idea for a backsplash is to use made-to-order mosaic patterns that come pre-glued in a variety of colors and patterns. Pressed decorative tiles are also available in 11 embossed patterns featuring daisies and ivy, and the Handmold line includes a variety of moldings, liners and trim.



Offering a worldlier feel, Walker & Zanger produces tiles formed from a variety of substances and inspired by areas around the globe. From France comes a tile formed by blending stone inlay with honed limestone and a rich, veined marble. Taking its name from Cote d'Or™, one of France's most famous wine regions; the intricately

carved stones used in the grand chateaux and monasteries of the area inspire these tiles. Included in the collection is a rich, beige limestone that gives an Old World French feel, and a black veined marble inlaid with a fleur de lis in the lightest mocha.

If a modern, Asian feel is more your style, Walker & Zanger offers Roku™, a glass collection in earthen hues available in glossy or matte finish, with a crisp, beveled edge. Another tile line offering a modern feel is the new Tribeca™ honed marble collection. Capturing the tone of one of Manhattan's most cosmopolitan neighborhoods, Tribeca tiles have a marbled gray and white complexion and an understated elegance.

But if you're really in the mood for something extremely hip, Metallismo™, the first metal mosaic tile collection available in the U.S., certainly fits the bill. Metallismo's lustrous steel and brass tiles have a daring style. Crafted in Italy and distributed exclusively through Walker & Zanger, these tiles are available in a variety of shapes, sizes and finishes that blend beautifully with all the other lines.

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