

# Countertops & sinks

Combining beauty and durability is easier than you think

**STONE IS STILL** the countertop material most desired by new-home buyers and remodelers, with granite and quartz leading the pack, according to recent industry surveys. Besides the obvious differences in appearance, our tests found huge differences in performance among granite, limestone, marble, quartz, and soapstone. Some can take lots of abuse, and others need lots of TLC to keep them looking good.

Tile and laminate countertops have lost favor. Tile did fine in most of our tests, but it can chip, and grout stains and mildew are hard to prevent. You may not want to write off laminate, though. It looks better than you may remember, and it's durable and budget-friendly.

Bamboo companies often tout their "green" credentials, but bamboo counters were easily stained, scratched, dented, and scorched in our tests and can warp and darken over time. Recycled glass countertops offer some of the same environmental benefits with better performance.

We stained, sliced, scratched, scorched, and nicked 14 materials from leading brands. Except for recycled glass, we found little difference among competing brands of each type of material. That's why we rate materials, not brands. Use our snapshots and Ratings to find which counter material is right for you.

If you're also replacing your sink and faucet, read our tips on page 33 before you do. Remember that drop-in sinks, which sit on top of the counter, can be used with any material. Undermounted sinks should be installed with counters made of a waterproof material. Stainless steel and solid surfacing can be used for a counter and sink for a seamless look.

## Avoid costly surprises

No matter what material you pick, have the fabricator take final measurements so that he bears responsibility for accuracy. And insist that the estimate and the contract specify the material's thickness and finish, and fees for sink, faucet, and cooktop cutouts, edges, backsplash, and removal of existing counters.



HIGHEST  
RATED

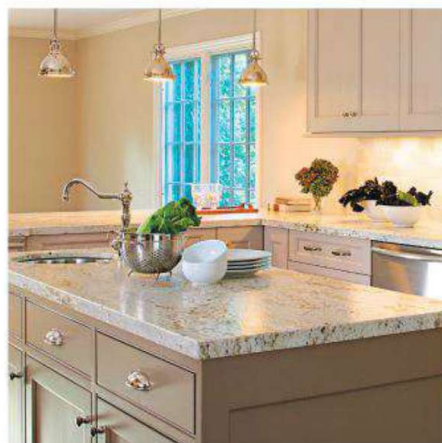
## Quartz

**COST** \$2,240 to \$5,600\*

Quartz's popularity is growing. Hot pots, serrated knives, abrasive pads, and most stains were no match for this material, whether polished or matte finish. Quartz is easy to maintain and doesn't require sealing like granite or other natural stone. It comes in a range of colors and styles that mimic natural stone, and in vibrant colors such as yellow, blue, and red. Because it's a synthetic material, the color you see on the sample is the color you'll get.

**BUT** edges and corners can chip, and only a pro can repair them. Rounded edges help.

**TIP** See a dozen different edges from various angles with the edge-options tool at [caesarstoneus.com](http://caesarstoneus.com).



## Granite

**COST** \$2,240 to \$5,600

Each granite slab looks different. So don't rely on the store sample; go to the stone yard. Have workers spray slabs with water to make the coloring stand out. If you find one you like, put a deposit on it. Heat, cuts, and scratches didn't damage granite in our tests, and when properly sealed, polished and matte-finish granite resisted most stains.

**BUT** granite needs to be resealed periodically to maintain stain resistance. And like quartz, its edges and corners can chip and will need a pro to repair them.

**TIP** Pick whichever finish you prefer, polished or matte. They performed similarly in our tests.

\*Prices are for a typical kitchen with 56 square feet of counters, and they include installation.



## Laminate

**COST** \$560 to \$2,240

Inexpensive, stain- and heat-resistant, and easy to install, laminate is also better-looking thanks to new printing technology. Formica's Anniversary Collection features 12 patterns with a midcentury modern flair. Formica and Wilsonart now offer decorative edges, such as bullnose or ogee, if you don't like the dark lines along the edge of the counter.

**BUT** cutting directly on laminate easily and permanently damages it, so use a cutting board.

**TIP** Seams between pieces of laminate should be no wider than one-sixteenth inch or they will look sloppy.



Formica's Anniversary Collection



## Recycled glass

**COST** \$3,360 to \$6,720

The look depends on the size of the pieces of glass. Large shards create a fun, contemporary look; finely ground glass makes it less busy. Most glass counters we tested resisted stains, cuts, scratches, and heat.

**BUT** this is the only material where we found a difference among brands. Cosentino's Eco counters were the only ones that developed a thin crack during our heat tests.

**TIP** Ask about maintenance. Some manufacturers suggest resealing and rewaxing every six to 12 months.

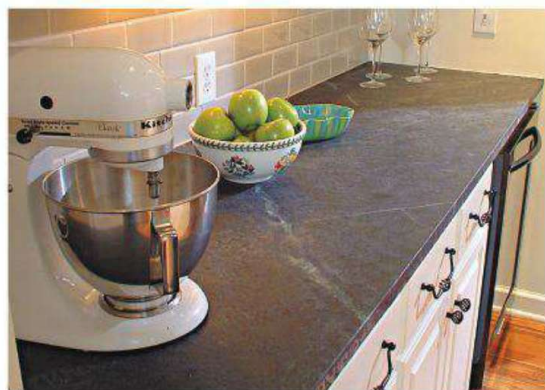
## Solid surfacing

**COST** \$1,960 to \$5,600

One of the few materials that can be used for counters, sink, and backsplash, solid surfacing creates a seamless appearance because joints are virtually invisible. It's available in a variety of colors and patterns, and is stain-resistant. Small nicks and scratches can be repaired. As with quartz, its color won't vary much from the store sample.

**BUT** it scratches and cuts easily.

**TIP** Online design tools such as [myroomdesigner.dupont.com](http://myroomdesigner.dupont.com) and apps such as mySurface can help you visualize a new counter in your kitchen. But as fun as these tools are, you should always see the material in person and bring home as large a sample as you can, even if you have to pay for it.



## Soapstone

**COST** \$2,800 to \$5,600

Used less often than granite, soapstone is superb at resisting heat damage. Small scratches can be repaired by sanding finely and applying mineral oil.

**BUT** soapstone nicks, cuts, and scratches easily, and some stains are too tough to be washed away.

**TIP** Install soapstone in low-use areas and choose complementary yet more durable materials for other places.



## Concrete and stainless steel

**COST** \$3,360 to \$6,720 (concrete); \$2,800 to \$8,400 (stainless steel)

They complement the industrial look of professional-style appliances. Concrete can be dyed or textured, though finishes affect performance. Topical sealers guard against stains but not heat. Penetrating sealers protect against heat but not stains and need to be reapplied. Matte or grain finishes are better at hiding damage to stainless counters.

**BUT** concrete nicks easily and can develop cracks. Stainless shows fingerprints, and it dents and scratches easily.

**TIP** It's important to get references for concrete fabricators, because many counters are made from scratch. Check recent jobs and counters made a couple of years ago to find out how well they have held up.





## Butcher block

**COST** \$2,240 to \$5,600

Wood adds warmth to any kitchen, and butcher block is easy to install and repair. As with concrete, the finish matters. Varnish improved stain-resistance, and penetrating oils diminished it.

**BUT** butcher block can be nicked and scratched easily. So think about your tolerance for signs of wear and tear. Do you think of them as a patina or a problem?

**TIP** Clean up stains as they happen, before they have time to set.



## Limestone and marble

**COST** \$2,800 to \$5,600 (limestone); \$2,800 to \$8,400 (marble)

They're classic beauties available in a wide variety of creamy whites and yellows, dark browns and grays, and other colors. Hot pots didn't mar the limestone we tested.

**BUT** They're easily scratched, nicked, cut, and stained, even when properly sealed. Heat damaged our marble.

**TIP** Put a few drops of water on stone that's near the sink or another high-use area and let it stand for 15 minutes. If the water doesn't stay in a bead, it's time to reseal it, which makes the surface more resistant to stains.



### COUNTERTOP BUYING GUIDE

Use your smart phone to download the RedLaser or ShopSavvy app and scan the code for video.



## Selecting your sink and faucet

We rolled up our sleeves and stained and scoured 18 double-bowl sinks and 16 single-handle pullout faucets. We also dropped blunt and sharp objects into the sinks, which were made of six different materials, and put hot pots in them. The results may surprise you.

### MYTH Sink brand matters most.

**REALITY** The manufacturer wasn't as important as the material. We tested big brands, including American Standard, Elkay, Franke, Kohler, and Moen.

Stainless-steel sinks aced most tests and were best of all. Solid-surface sinks came close, but a hot pot or a sharp knife that slips out of your hand can do damage.

### MYTH Spend more to get more.

**REALITY** We didn't find much difference between a \$115 stainless-steel sink and one for \$420, or between an \$80 faucet and one for \$600. Expensive, thicker-gauge stainless didn't necessarily perform better than thinner models. All fended off stains, heat, and dings, though they did dent. Sound-absorbing pads on the bottom of the sink's exterior hushed the noise of running water better than



spray-on coatings, and matte or grain finishes hid scratches and stains better than glossy or polished surfaces. Better valves, tougher finishes, and lifetime warranties against leaks and stains are available on all but the cheapest faucets.

### MYTH Color adds the right punch.

**REALITY** Colorful sinks made of solid surfacing, enameled steel, enameled cast iron, or fireclay were dented, dinged, or chipped in our tests. Acrylic sinks melted slightly when we left a hot pot in them, leaving a mark. Fireclay was the worst, cracking after our toughest drop test.

## Ratings Countertops

**All tested materials** In performance order.

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

Material	Price per sq. ft.	Overall score	Test results					
			Resists					
			Stains	Cutting	Heat	Abrasion	Impact	
Quartz (engineered stone)	\$40-\$100	84	●	●	●	●	●	
Granite	40-100	81	●	●	●	●	●	
Recycled glass (penetrating sealer) <sup>1</sup>	60-120	69	○	●	●	●	●	
Laminate	10-40	68	●	○	●	○	●	
Tile (ceramic and porcelain)	5-30	67	○	●	●	○	○	
Solid surfacing	35-100	53	○	○	○	○	○	
Soapstone (mineral-oil finish)	50-100	46	○	○	●	○	○	
Concrete (penetrating sealer)	60-120	40	○	○	●	○	○	
Concrete (topical sealer)	60-120	39	○	○	○	○	○	
Stainless steel	50-150	39	○	○	●	○	○	
Butcher block (varnished)	40-100	37	○	○	○	○	○	
Paper composite <sup>2</sup>	30-100	34	○	○	○	○	○	
Limestone	50-100	27	○	○	○	○	○	
Butcher block (oil finish)	40-100	24	○	○	○	○	○	
Marble	50-150	14	○	○	○	○	○	
Bamboo (beeswax/mineral-oil finish)	40-100	10	○	○	○	○	○	

<sup>1</sup> Unlike other brands, Cosentino's Eco line of recycled-glass counters developed a thin crack during our heat tests and was excluded from the Ratings. <sup>2</sup> Only Richlite's product was tested. Results for other brands may vary.

## Guide to the Ratings

**Overall score** summarizes performance in all tests. **Stains** shows resistance to 20 common foods and household products. **Cutting** reflects resistance to damage from weighted chef's and serrated knives used in slicing and chopping motions. **Heat** gauges how well materials resisted damage and discoloration from a pot filled with oil heated to 400° F. **Abrasion** is resistance to damage from a weighted sanding block. **Impact** reflects ability to withstand blunt and pointed weights dropped from up to 3½ feet. **Price** is the usual range per square foot, including installation.