



This 16-foot-long bar counter features Lagos Blue Caesarstone.

GOODBYE, GRANITE

Homeowners opt for engineered quartz and other man-made materials over natural stone for countertops

BY HOLLIE DEESE

It wasn't so long ago that when it came to kitchen upgrades, granite countertops were on the must-have list of many homeowners. In addition to stainless steel appliances and hardwood floors, it seemed nothing could topple the natural stone's reign as the top kitchen finish.

Well, times have changed. Granite's shine has faded as man-made materials such as engineered quartz have found favor with today's homeowners who are looking for materials that are just as high quality as stone, but have more flexibility in their style.

"Younger buyers and young professionals are primarily looking

for a more modern look, which those products provide," says Daryl Walny, vice president of operations with Nashville-area residential building company Carbine & Associates.

In the past few years, as granite's once-desirable unique veining and sometimes chaotic patterns have become its biggest liability, the man-made materials finding favor are less busy and have a much wider range of colors, making kitchen design much easier to control.

And they are especially popular among the new generation of buyers who are well-educated on the latest trends, thanks to a solid upbringing on HGTV, Pinterest and Houzz.com.



Caesarstone Statuario Maximus made by Caesarstone. \$85 to \$100 per square foot; find dealers at caesarstoneus.com

“We were doing granite for a good number of years and it’s almost like brass lighting fixtures — eventually it gets old and people get tired of it,” says Walny.

NATURAL VS. MAN-MADE

Despite the appeal of using a 100 percent natural material, today’s buyers are choosing engineered materials because they offer more control over the final look of the kitchen than nature’s heavily veined granite typically will allow, says Jerome Farris, an interior designer and buyer with Peddler Interiors in Murfreesboro, Tenn.

“Even in one slab you could have a very big inconsistency of gray on one end and then it could be very pink on the other end of the slab,” he says. “At least with the man-made products, you’re getting a very consistent tone of color going throughout.”

While some quartz countertops are made of quarried slabs of the natural stone, many engineered quartz materials like Silestone and Caesarstone are made by combining about 90 percent ground natural quartz with polymer resins, leading to a final product with higher durability and a wider range of colors than stone. The finer the quartz is ground, the smoother the final look.

“Quartz is more durable than granite, it’s less porous than granite and you’re getting more simple patterns in it,” Farris says. “You still have vein issues and things like that, but overall quartz gives you more of that sleek feel.”

Still, natural materials like soapstone (a type of metamorphic rock composed mostly of talc that is durable, stain-resistant and patinas with age) are also having a moment, mainly because their subtle graining and colors still retain the desired natural status.

EASIER TO MAINTAIN

Heather Blue Harkovich, owner of Heather Scott Home and Design in Austin, says she hasn’t selected granite for her clients in the past four years. Unfortunately, a top choice — marble — can’t really take the heat of a busy kitchen and can easily scratch and stain.

So she steers them to quartz products. Unlike natural stone, engineered quartz is non-porous, making it stain- and scratch-resistant and antimicrobial. Its durability withstands wine stains and sharp knives, and it can be cleaned with a dry cloth or by using warm, soapy water.

GROWING AFFORDABILITY

Designers and builders also opt for engineered quartz products because as their popularity increases and more manufacturers enter the game, they become more affordable.

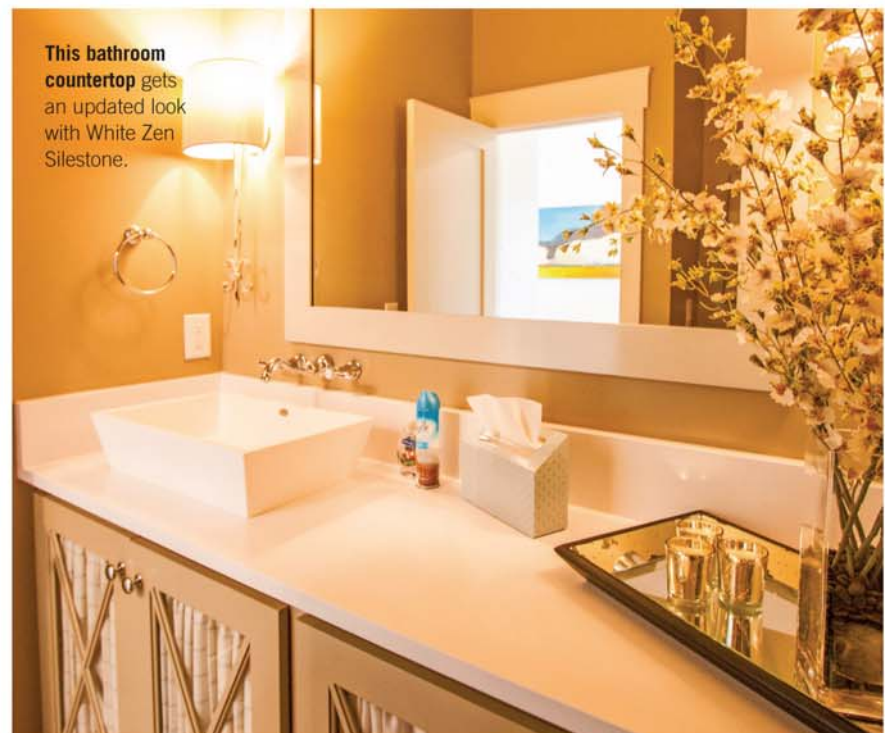
“It wasn’t really until the later »



Silestone
Snowy Ibiza made by Silestone. \$72 per square foot installed, homedepot.com



Silestone
White Arabesque made by Silestone. \$72 per square foot installed, homedepot.com



This bathroom countertop gets an updated look with White Zen Silestone.



This dining table has a fresh look thanks to Cosmopolitan White Caesarstone.



Quartz Cove by Martha Stewart Living, \$80 per square foot, homedepot.com

Quartz Midnight by Martha Stewart Living, \$80 per square foot, homedepot.com

'90s and early 2000s when we were getting flooded with the amount of stone coming in (from other countries) and prices really started dropping dramatically," Walny says.

And the same thing is happening right now for quartz products. For kitchens with open layouts that put countertops on display, having a high-style look with little maintenance and high durability is key.

"Obviously the kitchen is the heart of the home," Harkovich says. "If you have a material that you don't have to worry about, you won't have to stress when people come over. If they have a quartz product, there's just no worry."

WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T

One material making an unexpected rise in popularity is pewter, which has a very different finish than stone or quartz. It provides a durable metal surface in a metallic gray that patinas with age. Any scratches become a part of the finish and cleanup is simple.

"I absolutely love that pewter look, especially on an island," Farris says. Having the center of the kitchen done in pewter and perimeter counters in a different material results in a layered look. "It gives you that really warm, earthy kitchen feel that people love so much," he says.

Walny has experimented with all kinds of countertop materials for clients, some with better results than others. What surprisingly worked? A blue-hued counter made of recycled Skyy Vodka bottles. What didn't? Concrete. While some people love the look, it is hard to maintain, is incredibly heavy and requires regular sealing, Walny says.

"We did a few bartops in concrete about five or six years ago and had problems with cracking, we had some finish issues, some staining issues and things like that," he says. "We just kind of drifted away from that and haven't really had a whole lot of demand for it." ●