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A piece of dark, hand-planed walnut on this kitchen bar creates a one-of-a-kind look that's warm, modern and organic.

COUNTERTOP TRENDS

DESIGNERS EYE WOOD, PORCELAIN AS STYLISH ALTERNATIVES

BY CATHERINE GAUGH

All-white kitchens with countertops made from slabs of granite have been the dominant style of home kitchens for several years. It is a clean and sleek look, but maybe it is time to try something a little different.

Earlier this year, the Pasadena Showcase House of Design presented a kitchen with an elegant alternative — deeply dark, hand-planed walnut and creamy grey porcelain for the counters and the island top.

Becky Zoni-McMakin of RZ Designs San Diego told us she's noticed a return of wood to kitchens, including the renewal

and reuse of older wood cabinets. But how practical is a wood countertop?

"If you are going to use wood for counters, it has to be walnut," she says. "There are claims that it is easy on knives, and self-healing, so you don't see the cuts. If it starts looking worn, you can do a light sanding and re-oil it.

"But wood absorbs moisture and can swell, so I wouldn't recommend putting it next to a water source. Every type of countertop needs cleaning and maintenance, but wood and water don't generally mix, so that means more maintenance," Zoni-McMakin said. "When you are finished cleaning the wood counter-

top, make sure it is completely dry."

Q: Could we talk about the pros and cons of the most popular types of countertops? I'd like to separate the brand names from the actual material. Let's start with the most expensive: marble?

A: You see a lot of Carrara white marble counters in high-end showrooms. Marble is a natural stone, and quite beautiful, but it can absorb stains and have surface damage from wine, vinegar, lemon juice, lime juice and other acidic foods.

Marble is fine for bathroom counters if chemicals like acetone are kept away. And marble is

great for floors.

Q: And the ever-popular granite?

A: Granite is a natural stone and still an excellent product that is in high demand. Granite can also stain and scratch, and because it is porous, can be discolored. It can also show heat marks. A sealer can help protect it and keep it looking nice.

Q: It's described as natural; does that mean it is environmentally correct?

A: While it is a natural stone, granite is mined, milled and machine-polished in Italy and Portugal, and then shipped as

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slabs to the U.S. All the fuel used in shipping is not exactly earth-friendly.

Q: Truly vintage kitchens still have counters covered in small tiles and a lot of grout to keep clean. Are those still installed?

A: Yes, they are, although the tiles are much larger than the old clay tiles, so you see less grout.

The porcelain in countertops is tile. Porcelain tile comes in sheets, 4 feet by 8 feet, the same size of stone slabs. It is thinner than granite or quartz and is exceptionally light, so you don't need a subsurface to support its weight.

The installation is extremely important; I would worry that it could break before it is installed. It holds up to acids, cold and heat. You can cut directly on it, and it won't dull the knife. It can come with veining to resemble marble.

Another popular countertop



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Quartz is the most popular countertop option, beloved for its beauty and durability.

material is stainless steel, especially in commercial kitchens. Stainless steel appliances and counters go together and look good. Stainless steel is easy to clean. But it can scratch, too.

Q: And those water spots! Quartz has been talked about lately as the most popular type

of countertop. Does it deserve the acclaim?

A: It does. Quartz is a man-made product, named for the main mineral used in it, which is the hardest and most abundant material on Earth. Quartz and other minerals are mixed with resin to produce a solid slab that

is sustainable and recyclable. It looks like natural stone.

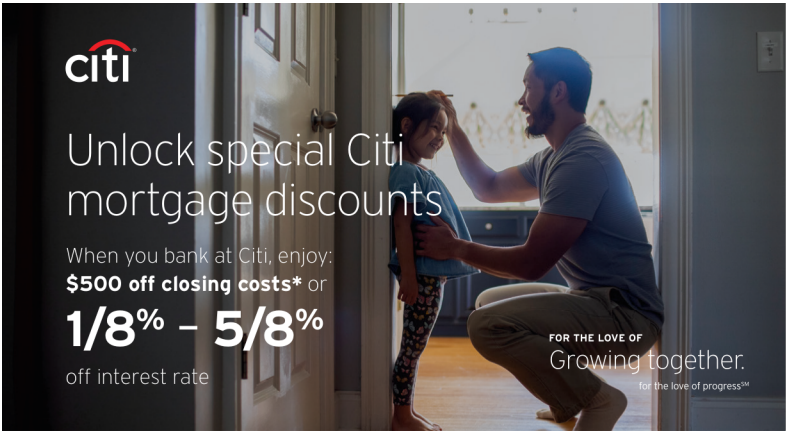
The quartz slabs are about the same thickness as granite but are much lighter and they come in every color you can think of. It can be made with large patterns that never look like flaws, unlike natural stone. It is water and heat resistant.


Quartz has a shimmering quality. When there is a choice between granite and quartz, clients usually choose quartz. I tell people who want the best, true white countertop that they should look at quartz.

Q: Is Corian a quartz product?

A: Corian was the first brand name for engineered-stone, solid-surface countertops, back in the '70s and '80s. It was made with quartz minerals and resins and at first only came in white, cream and gray. It has gotten better over time and comes in many more colors. They still make great sinks out of Corian to go with the countertops.

Catherine Gough is a freelance writer.





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