

Countertop



Chemistry

BY DEBRA JUDGE SILBER

Mixing surfaces makes a kitchen dynamic and functional—but getting it right is more art than science

Flip, swipe, or click your way through any kitchen photo gallery, and you'll notice quickly that using more than one countertop material has become the norm. The continued popularity of islands, exposure to an array of intriguing new materials online, and the expectation that a good kitchen fills multiple roles—with its countertops serving as the playing field for activities as diverse as cooking, socializing, and bill paying—all push designers and homeowners to think beyond a single surface that does it all.

And why not? Mixing materials not only presents creative opportunities, but it ensures the most sensible surface for a particular area's assigned use. After all, the qualities we require in a surface used for chopping carrots are far different from those we value in the penin-

sula where we sip coffee or the counter that holds the dish drain. And function is just one issue to consider.

The subtle language of surfaces

Kitchens come in lots of styles—from traditional to contemporary, from farmhouse to midcentury. Because countertops represent so much visual real estate, the material they're made of can exert a strong influence on—even make or break—a kitchen's identity. Particularly when several surfaces are involved, it pays to be aware that materials convey a character that may be at odds with the rest of the kitchen.

"We look for the kitchen to be consistent in design and detailing, and this definitely includes our choice of countertop materials,"



A NATURAL BALANCE

Connecticut designer Rafe Churchill's traditional focus leads him to pair natural materials such as wood and stone that have markedly different qualities. "Very often we will do the perimeter cabinets in stone and the island in a 'food prep' wood surface—a surface ready for direct cutting and typical kitchen work," he says. The wood surface shown here is maple with a food-safe oil finish. The perimeter cabinets are topped with soapstone and include an integrated sink.

A SURFACE FOR

WORKSURFACES: It all depends

The best surface for a prep area depends on whether you're cutting, rolling, or assembling. Even then, preferences vary. "It really hinges on how the client is going to use the kitchen," says Nicole Starnes Taylor. "I think Carrara is a great worksurface, especially for rolling dough and baking." Rafe Churchill likes wood for working countertops, but he concedes that zinc is also "a great material and with time can show a beautiful patina."

SINK AREAS: Make it waterproof

Where water comes into play, easy maintenance and durability rule. When a client chose edge-grain white oak for her countertops, Cindy Black mounted the faucet in a slab of Thassos marble to keep water and wood separated. Rafe Churchill, whose traditional designs tend toward natural materials, also uses natural stones beside the sink, often with an integral drain board. Stainless steel, solid surfaces, and engineered stones—Zodiac, Silestone, Caesarstone, or Cambria—also get the thumbs-up here.

GATHERING SPOTS: Wood wins

Wood is soft to the touch and beautiful to the eyes. As humans, we connect to it, making it a great surface for drawing people together. Natural stones, even granite, can have a similar allure, says Courtney Fadness: "When we bring those materials inside, we feel connected to them. Subconsciously, we feel comfortable with them."



Sources: teragren.com (bamboo) • brookscustom.com (walnut, maple, zinc) • specialtystainless.com (antique matte stainless)

says designer Rafe Churchill of Sharon, Conn. "A contemporary kitchen can begin to lean traditional if the wrong material is used, and likewise, a traditional kitchen can even more easily move toward contemporary with a very cold and glossy countertop." For the traditional kitchens he designs, Churchill likes to use materials such as Danby and Carrara marbles as well as Pietra Cardosa, soapstone, zinc, and wood.

These natural materials, wood in particular, exert a subconscious attraction that invites lingering. This makes them especially appropriate for gathering places. Architect Nicole Starnes Taylor uses wood for the "perch spaces" in the small Seattle kitchens she remodels. The attraction of the wood surface draws visitors out of the cook's zone and "helps define where you hang out," she says.

Achieving balance through contrast

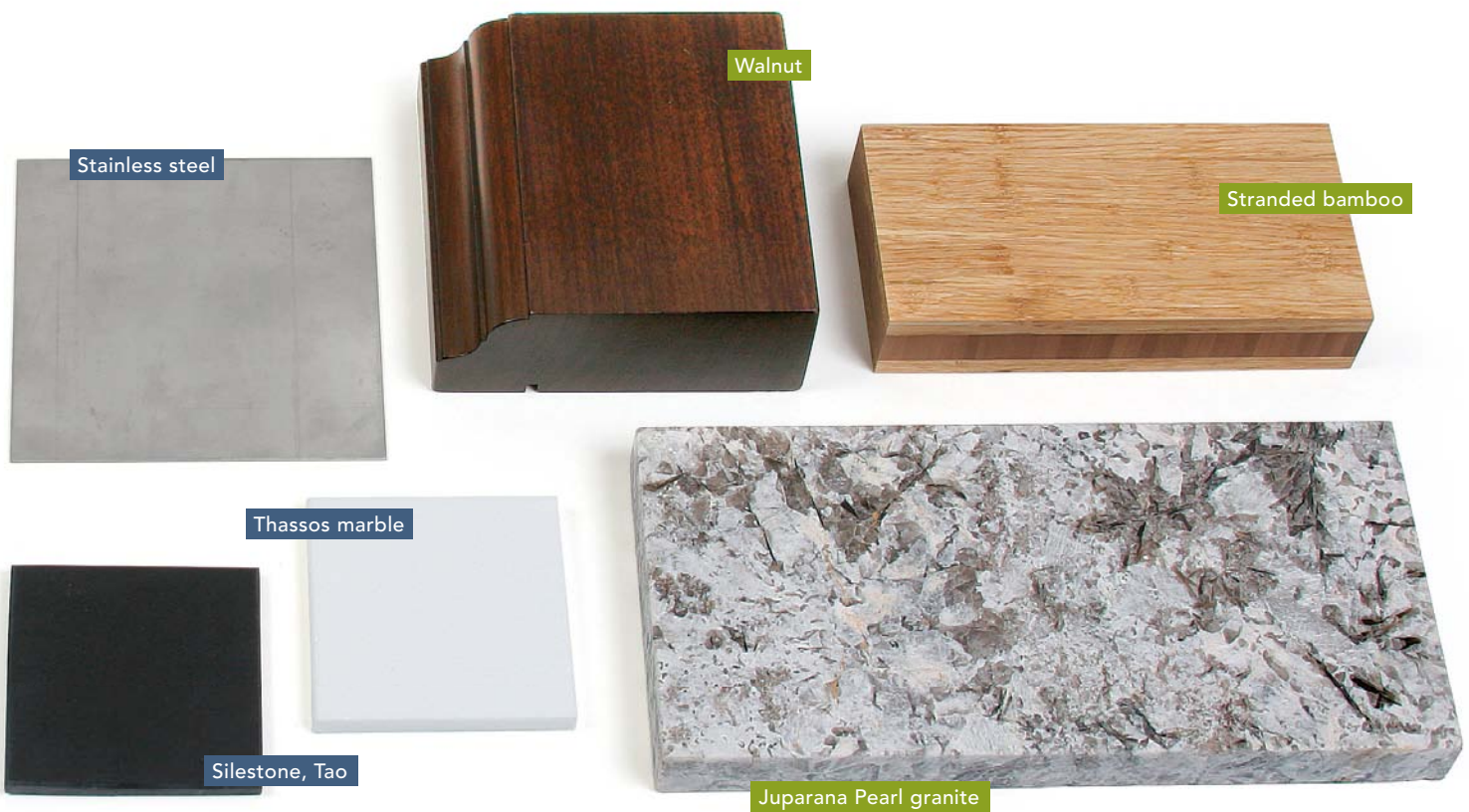
With exotic choices abounding these days, homeowners often latch onto a unique countertop that can be difficult to pair with another, notes Courtney Fadness, who designed interiors for Massachusetts-based Hutker Architects. Getting two materials to coexist peacefully, she says, starts with establishing a hierarchy, and then a balance, between them. "You have to consider which one takes center stage and why it's taking center stage," Fadness says. "Then you figure out how to balance that or, alternatively, create contrast."

Breaking down materials into contrasting tonal groups—one for the kitchen's perimeter, another for the island—simplifies the process. You might, Fadness suggests, assign dark tones to the perimeter and contrast that with an island topped with light, veined marble. Austin, Texas, architect Cindy Black, whose firm, Hello Kitchen, focuses on kitchen design, also emphasizes using tonal qualities to strike the right balance. "We don't start with colors; we start with tones," Black says, adding that she then weighs material options based on durability, cost, and other qualities.

Countertop colors are influenced by the rest of the kitchen as well. When architect Stuart Sampley remodeled a midcentury home in Austin, the countertop options were narrowed significantly by the clients' selection of bright-orange perimeter cabinets. "It's such a bold color, you want to keep the rest of the palette black and white," he says. To provide contrast without competition, he chose black Silestone to top the white island, and white Silestone over the boldly colored perimeter cabinets. He uses these and similar materials when he wants a countertop to fade into the background. "They're not designed to make a statement," he explains. "They're designed to be durable and quiet."

With different materials, contrast can be used to balance one against the other. Says Churchill, "We like to use contrasting materials to minimize the coldness that stone can often introduce even to a

EVERY PURPOSE



stonesource.com (Thassos marble) • silestoneusa.com (Silestone) • tortora.nystonestudio.com (granite, Cararra marble)



SUPPORTING ROLE

In this kitchen, a subdued perimeter of Blanco Maple Silestone helps the richly grained walnut top of the island stand out. "The idea is to treat the island like a piece of furniture," says architect Stuart Sampley. "In older homes, an island was a piece of furniture, so it would have had a top that was different from the perimeter." The Blanco Maple Silestone contains clear terrazzo chips that tend to take on the surrounding color, allowing it to blend in even more.



traditional kitchen.” Wood, he notes, “is very effective in warming up the room and introducing some texture and organic colors.”

For Fadness and others, choosing more than one countertop surface is frequently a result of balancing clients’ aesthetic preferences with their lifestyle and budget. “Budget is a big factor,” she says. “A client might really want marble, but then it evolves into a conversation about whether there is a smaller area—a bar, for example—where we could have that material and still stay within our budget.”

Alternative materials can help to maintain lifestyle sanity as well. Fadness recalls another client mesmerized by marble. “She loved the natural surface and the dramatic veining and the light color,” Fadness says. “But she was concerned about the maintenance and durability. In that case, we did a beautiful center island as a showpiece with a huge slab of marble. We paired it with a coordinating Caesarstone for the cooking area that pulled out the gray veining in the marble.” When clients latch onto a specific aesthetic or trend, Fadness says, returning to issues of budget and lifestyle can help to determine which materials—or how much of each material—to use.

A few don’ts

Choosing countertops that harmonize is more an art than a science, but there are some mixes that raise a red flag. The first is that multiple materials typically don’t work well in a very small kitchen. Likewise, it’s usually a bad idea to use two materials that both exhibit strong patterns. Finally, pairing fakes with natural materials is risky. “Mix-

AN INVITING SPOT

Architect Cindy Black used a raised white-oak bar surface to create an inviting landing place on this island topped with Pietra Cardosa. The bar’s waterfall edge ties it to the floor, also of white oak. She chose the wood, she says, because it “brings warmth to the island.”

ing natural materials with man-made surfaces would be visually confusing, much like having different finishes on cabinet hinges and nearby knobs,” says Churchill. Black agrees: “I wouldn’t mix something that’s faux with a countertop that’s the real version of the faux.”

When the two materials have markedly different characteristics, however, it can work. “Marbles and granites that have a lot of movement pair nicely with quieter materials like Caesarstone that are dark gray or black and that have a little depth,” says Fadness. It gets back to maintaining hierarchy and contrast. For the best guarantee of a good match, Fadness advises taking a step back when the choices become overwhelming. “I think it’s important to have a strong concept from the beginning, and to let that original concept aid you in evaluating what countertop materials will work and which won’t,” she says. “You have to keep tying it back to concept and function, function, function. You can’t do it all.” □

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