

## KITCHENS

# Granite's lost its luster as a must-have



KEN HIVELY/STC

**GLASS:** A shiny, modern look that's easy to clean.

**BY MARY MACVEAN**  
Los Angeles Times

To anyone reading real estate ads in recent years, it could seem that granite was the only material worth using for a kitchen counter, as important as updated electrical or a reliable roof.

Granite isn't going anywhere. But many designers and homeowners are turning to glass, manufactured stone, metal and other materials to create counters that work for people who

actually cook as well for those who see the kitchen as a decorative accessory.

"What consumers now have seen is there is kind of this granite fatigue. Everyone has granite," said Ed Rogers, director of business development at CaesarStone US, based in Van Nuys, Calif.

CaesarStone and other brands, including Silestone, sell engineered quartz, a durable product made from more than 90 percent crushed quartz mixed with a resin.

Manufacturers are producing dozens of colors of engineered quartz, some of them trying to replicate the look of other stones or concrete, at prices comparable to those of midlevel granites. Both a virtue and a drawback is its consistency — no fossils or natural quirks, though that could change too as companies work to mimic the natural variations of marble or add a leathery surface texture.

Glass counters too are shining. Lighted from below, they can add an appealing glow to a kitchen. Buyers also like the hygienic qualities of glass in these days of the hand sanitizer.

### • TURN TO COUNTERS, 4H

Granite had been "reserved for the ultra high end," but now it's available in big box home stores, Rogers said. "It was the home center and the production builder that moved this market."

And moved some homeowners to other choices that are new and appealing to green consumers, such as engineered quartz, as well as some that have been around for centuries, like soapstone or marble.

"I have not done a single granite countertop in 10 years," said Dan Campbell, a Los Angeles contractor who specializes in kitchen design and remodels. "Maybe because it's so overused. It all blends together."

Troy Adams also hasn't used much granite in the high-end kitchens he designs, though he acknowledged there are many beautiful granite slabs available.

Improvements to other materials, such as stainless steel with fine patterns that resist fingerprints, have made alternatives more popular, Adams said.

One of the materials he likes to use is lava stone, which is quarried from a volcano in France, enameled and then fired at high temperatures. It's stain-, heat- and scratch-resistant, and it has a sort of crackly surface that can be made in intense colors. It's also three to four times as costly as many granites, Adams said.

Whether the kitchen counter is just a spot to toss the keys and mail, the place for breakfast around an island, the lab for a chili cook-off entry or the respite for sitting alone with a glass of pinot grigio, the kitchen counter is inevitably a focal point

of what's become the center of many homes.

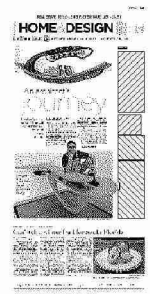
In sophisticated, high-end kitchens, an island might be topped with one material, the sink and cooking area in another. In his own kitchen, Adams combined lava stone, stainless steel and glass.

That doesn't mean the old standbys, including solid surfaces such as Corian, are gone from the market — particularly in budget-minded kitchen plans. Wood — often used for cutting blocks or other inserts to countertops — also can work for counters, whether in a farmhouse kitchen in the city or a sleek contemporary space.

Although it still represents a small share of overall sales, engineered quartz has been the fastest-growing category in the last five or six years, CaesarStone's Rogers said.

CaesarStone was the first engineered stone, made in 1987, said Arik Tendler, president of CaesarStone US. It was, and still is, made in Israel, where he grew up to become a stone fabricator.

When he was first ap-



proached by a salesman with engineered quartz, his reaction was: "Do me a favor. I'm a second-generation stone guy. Have some coffee and get out of here."

Obviously, he changed his opinion over time. In Southern California, he went door to door to introduce his company starting in 1999.

Campbell said he likes the seamless counter front possible with engineered quartz. "No one wants to see the manufacturing of anything if you can avoid it," he said.

Many companies also are working to make their products — natural and manufactured — as eco-friendly as possible. Consumers who care might check a product



**STAINLESS STEEL:** A durable and professional-looking counter.

for its percentage of recycled materials, which varies considerably, or the conditions of its mining.

Cosentino reports that its Eco line is made of 75 percent post-consumer or post-industrial materials, including mirrors, glass, stone scraps and porcelain. Other counters are being made from recycled glass or recycled paper sealed with wax.

"Granite is going to stay as long as they keep on digging," said Oren Osovski, an

L.A. contractor and interior designer, noting that the range in appearance can provide a look that feels unique. "If you want something beautiful that only you have, you have to have granite or marble."

The toughest part of the kitchen counter decision may be figuring out what you care about most. Durability? A unique look? Color? Price? Here's a look at some of the most common options, with an assessment of their quality from designers, manufac-

turers and the website [www.kitchen.com](http://www.kitchen.com).

## CONCRETE

**Pros:** Modern, industrial look. Can be made in any shape and in a variety of colors.

**Cons:** Can stain and crack, though that also may be an appeal. Relatively expensive. May need a sealer and wax applied periodically to protect against staining.

## GRANITE

**Pros:** Huge range of colors and prices. Durable. Stain- and heat-resistant, though some sealers commonly used to combat its porous qualities can be damaged by excessive heat.

**Cons:** Some designers say it has become overused.

## TILE

**Pros:** Budget-friendly. Unlimited color and pattern choices. Durable, heat- and stain-resistant.

**Cons:** Grout can stain and be tough to clean. Not a smooth surface for some cooking tasks.

## GLASS

**Pros:** Looks new and modern. Can be made in many colors, patterns and shapes. Translucent qualities enable natural light to pass through. Nonporous, heat-resistant, easy to clean. Can be made from recycled glass.

**Cons:** Shows fingerprints. Can crack or break.

## MARBLE

**Pros:** Classic looks. Sometimes has translucent quality. Great for making and rolling pastry dough because it's cool to the touch.

**Cons:** Can stain.

## LAMINATES

**Pros:** Huge range of colors, patterns and finishes.

Budget-friendly. Easy to maintain.

**Cons:** Chips can be difficult to repair.

## ENGINEERED QUARTZ

**Pros:** Extremely tough. Dozens of colors and patterns. Easy to clean. Consistent color and detail. Many manufacturers, including **CaesarStone**, Silestone, Cambria. Considered more sustainable, as remnants often can be recycled.

**Cons:** Lacks unique colorations and details found in marble or granite.

## STAINLESS STEEL

**Pros:** Durable. Stain-resistant. Looks like a professional kitchen. Other metals, such as zinc and copper, lend an unusual appearance that will change over time.

**Cons:** Can show fingerprints and scratch.

## WOOD

**Pros:** Can be used as a chopping board.

**Cons:** Shows knife marks. Susceptible to water damage. Requires periodic reoiling.

## OTHER NATURAL STONE

**Pros:** Slate, soapstone, quartzite, lava stone and others can provide a variety of looks. Soapstone gives a traditional farmhouse appeal, while lava stone is as modern as can be. Some can be made into sinks as well.

**Cons:** Depending on the rarity, it can be expensive.

## SOLID SURFACES

**Pros:** Products such as Corian come in a variety of shapes, colors and finishes.

Non-porous, low-maintenance. Can be made into a seamless piece.

**Cons:** Can be stained or

scratched, though marks can be repaired, sometimes with just an abrasive cleaner.



PHOTOS BY KEN HIVELY/MCT

**LAVA STONE:** A modern look from a natural stone that comes at a high price.