

Countertop Mythology 101

1. "The last countertop you'll ever buy"

This statement has been cleverly used by sales people to sell high end (expensive) countertop surfacing. Don't be fooled, what they really mean is, this countertop could potentially last the lifetime of the house so long as it doesn't stain, crack, or chip, design trends and your personal tastes don't change, and you don't get sick of living in the same motif for a decade or more. Imagine your parents still living with those pea green or burnt orange countertops of the 70's and 80's (although I'm sure there are still a few out there). The average kitchen is remodeled every 11.8 years (although in my family, this is the time it takes to finish a remodel)

2. "Resale value, this countertop is an investment"

A great way to justify spending 3-5 times as much on high end surfacing... Maybe not the most savvy business decision. Imagine you're in the market for a home. One has high performance laminate countertops that cost around \$2,000, the other has high end surfacing that cost somewhere between \$5,000 and \$10,000. Are you going to fork over an extra 3,000 to 8,000 on the house with more expensive countertops? My guess is the seller would be lucky to recoup 30% of their initial investment on their high end surfacing.

3. "My countertop is a natural product so it must be environmentally friendly".

Remember that petroleum is a naturally occurring product. Like fossil fuels, stones are limited to what has already been created during the earth's forming. In addition to not being a renewable resource, stone is very destructive to the landscape in the quarrying process and then is very transportation intensive leaving a horrible carbon footprint. Unlike stone, laminate countertops are manufactured mostly of renewable resources. Laminate, typically 1/16" thick, is laid up on 3/4" wood substrate. Though laminate is made from a combination of papers and petroleum byproducts, this is only a small percentage of the actual countertop; less than 8%. The majority of the top is made from renewable wood products.

Many of the stones and tiles available for the surfacing market are brought in from overseas. Most of these fall into the categories of either expensive Italian products or cheap Chinese products (both in price and in quality). Laminate is manufactured in the United States by the four major American brands: Formica, Wilsonart, Nevamar, and Pionite. Laminate is lightweight and flexible allowing for shipments to be made by common carriers like UPS and Fed-Ex instead of heavy duty trucking companies. If environment or local economy is a high priority for you, take a serious look at laminate.

4. "With high end surfacing, I can cut directly on the countertop"

It is true that stone is a very hard surface and will not scar nearly as deep as some other surfaces, but even stone can be scored with a knife. Once scored, stone can be refinished, but it is a laborious and somewhat messy task and usually carries a price tag that would most likely rival the replacement cost of laminate countertops.

Additionally, wood and stone are both porous materials that can harbor the growth of bacteria. Why would anyone introduce food onto a surface with those characteristics? Also, stone and solid surface are both extremely abrasive to steel and are always detrimental to the sharpness of your fine cutlery. Solid surface and wood can both be repaired at a significant expense while the nicest cutting board is less than \$100. It just doesn't make sense to cut on anything other than an expendable board designated for cutting (which is the "cutting" in cutting board)!

5. "I can set hot pans directly on high end surfacing"

This is probably one of the biggest misconceptions. Yes you can, but not if you value your kitchen counters, no matter what the material. Here are some absolute facts that you should know. Solid surface actually has a much lower heat tolerance than laminate. Yes, you heard it right! Acrylic (solid surfacing) starts to deform at around 250 degrees. That's only 40 degrees above boiling point! The rapid heating of a concentrated area in the solid surfacing can cause cracking at even lower temperatures. Here's a fact that very seldom makes it out of the stone fab shop. Natural veins and fissures are all a part of natural stone slabs and are typically weak points in the structural integrity of slabs. Over the years we have spoken with many visitors at trade shows who have experienced failures in these areas, sometimes due to heat or a blow to their stone slab that otherwise might have been uneventful.

Summary

The point is that no matter what the surface material, if you don't use heat trivets and cutting boards you're risking damage to your countertops and your utensils, so choose your countertop material based on what works best for you all-around. When it comes to the word "green" beware of the spin! Just recently there was an article on the web about the 10 most environmentally friendly countertop materials. One of them was $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick sheet material that was made from recycled wood waste. I couldn't help but laugh when I saw that the binder (the glue that holds it all together) was acrylic, which as a binder, had to be a very significant portion of the material. So my question is, what is so earth friendly about acrylic polymers, another petroleum based product!

When choosing a surface, consider elements like how close the actual color will be to the sample that you are choosing from. Again, stone is almost always many shades off from the counter samples, so unless you pick from the actual slabs, I hope you like surprises. Laminate, on the other hand, is as close to dead on as humanly possible. You would most likely need a spectrometer to differentiate between your sample and the actual countertops when they arrive.

I know it seems as if I've been praising laminate and bashing all the other surfaces, so I will take a moment to clarify my position. In my opinion, which has been refined over 35 years in the surfacing business, there are only two truly viable surfaces in today's market. One, of course, is laminate, for its consistency in color, hardness, variety of patterns and colors, availability and affordability. The other is quartz which also goes under names like man-made or engineered stone. You will notice that I mentioned no downsides to quartz; that's because there are none. Quartz is consistent in color, has no natural fissures and can take the heat (although I would still use a trivet). If I had to list a downside to quartz, it would be price and color options. Quartz is on average, even more expensive than solid surfacing and stone and even though the available palette is growing, many people find themselves trying to build their color scheme around the limited selections in quartz.

If I have one message, it's don't discount laminate. After all the whims and fashions over the last three decades, laminate is still the #1 selling surfacing product, not only in America, but throughout the world! And about the time you think it's all been done, leave it to Wilsonart to reinvent the product all over again. Stay tuned!

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