

Designing With Countertops

by Dave Hagerman, CKD

There are lots of good reasons for mixing countertop materials in your kitchen designs. Doing so helps you to personalize your clients' projects. Using different materials can also help create form and balance in a room. And various combinations can add color or texture to a design, create a better work surface, help you stay within a client's budget, or create a more luxurious kitchen.

Countertop Strategies

Before you recommend countertop

combinations to your customer, consider how the visual weight, color, and size of the countertop material you have in mind relates to its surrounding partners. Compare textures, patterns and colors, and pay attention to which work well with the design theme.

For instance, laminate and solid surfacing work easily with others. Wood, however, because it is harder to maintain, tends to work best as a secondary material. The visual properties of granite make it difficult to mix with other

materials, while stainless steel, butcher block, and tile mix well with others.

Here are some design ideas I've used effectively.

Islands. Top an island with a different material than that used for the main countertops. Since the top stands by itself, there is no need to worry about how it will be joined to another material. In addition, it's a great way to economically upgrade the look of a kitchen. For example, use a piece of granite or marble that complements the color of a laminate countertop.

Work center. Create a lowered "baking" or work center out of a different surfacing material. The material you choose must allow for cutting and food contact, and, if used to roll out pastry dough, should include a cooling surface, such as marble. Placing the work area at a different level will simplify the joining of materials and provide a more comfortable work height. A height of 30 to 32 inches works well for most cooks.

Theme repetition. Draw attention to an eating area, island, or peninsula by

Topping an island with a more expensive material is a good way to get a lot of visual bang for the buck.



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Solid-surfacing edge treatments can be simple inlay strips (left), contrasting borders (middle), or pricey metal inlays (right).



Limiting the use of the special edge treatment to the island places this design feature where it will get the most notice.

repeating a theme from the design of the project. For example, if tiles are used for a backsplash, consider tiles for a surface material in these areas.

Insets. Inset a countertop material—such as marble or granite that will accept hot pots and pans on either side of the cooking surface. You could make this material level with the main tops, or you could drop the height of the entire cooking area. Be cautious of including this feature if there are small children in the home, and remember to

allow enough counter width for safety.

Inlays. Inlay a pattern with contrasting material or different color into a laminate or solid surfacing countertop. If working with a stone countertop, be aware that since inlays are often created with computers and waterjet machines, they can become quite costly.

You can also use metal inlays to trim an island or work area made of solid surface or natural stone. The material is routed to receive the thickness of the metal rod, which is epoxied in place.

Remember to use inlays as if they were jewelry: Limiting them to a special area will have more effect than using them throughout a room.

Countertop Edges

Dressing up countertop edges is another way to add pizzazz to a design. Here are some design and material options.

Solid surfacing. This material can be polished like stone and offers the most creative options with color and inlays. Some suppliers offer matching laminate, so you can have a laminate top with solid surface edge, producing the look of a complete solid surface while eliminating the ugly seam line common to laminate tops. This idea drove Wilsonart to its newest product: A thin layer of solid surface material, called Solid Surface Veneer, which installs

like laminate and saves on the cost of full-thickness solid surfacing.

Metal. Metal edges or inlays, usually of stainless steel or brass, can be used to cap the edge of a laminate or solid surface countertop. Brass rails, which attach to and stand out from the edge, are another option, and provide a convenient place to hang kitchen linen.

Natural stone. Granite, marble, soapstone, and limestone offer a deluxe appearance, and edges can be milled to create different profiles. Other materials can be added to the edge for detailing, although stone edges usually work best with stone tops. Remember that stone can chip.

Butcher block. Although butcher block usually comes with square edges, consider creating an edge profile by running your router along the outside top edge.

Ceramic tile. These edges must be used with care. Tile tops look great with tile edging, and some tile is offered with bull-nose edge pieces. Wood edging and solid surfacing also work well with ceramic tile.

If you don't have experience mixing countertop materials, visit fabricators in your area and ask them to provide you with samples or photos of their work. It just might be what makes your design stand out.



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