

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC



October 17, 2009

Granite's popularity in countertops challenged

by **Kara G. Morrison**

Architect Brett Hobza used granite in a previous [kitchen remodel](#) and liked the natural-stone countertops.

But when he was redesigning the kitchen of his Midcentury-Modern Ralph Haver home in the Marlen Grove neighborhood of Phoenix last year, he wanted a lighter, cleaner look.

"We wanted a real durable, almost indestructible finish, and we also wanted something that was going to be sleek, with a contemporary look to it," said Hobza, a principal at DLR Group in Phoenix.

His choice: CaesarStone, an engineered-quartz countertop, in a white "[oyster](#)" finish, with small flecks of clear, brown, copper and hints of green stone.

"It's exactly what we wanted," he said. "The CaesarStone had a beautiful depth to it."

As countertop trends go, granite is more affordable than ever, and it remains an extremely popular choice in new and remodeled kitchens. It's also preferred among many luxury-home buyers, despite the growing number of options.

But the natural stone may be losing a bit of its luster to engineered stone, as well as to various green options (such as bamboo and PaperStone, made of recycled paper). Granite has become so very . . . common.

Quartz countertops aren't new, but they come in a broader range of colors that either mimic the complex patterns of granite or boast a solid or nearly solid color. And because they're non-porous and don't need to be sealed like granite, they're easier to maintain.

"Engineered-stone or quartz countertops are starting to gain popularity," said Greg Dumka, senior project consultant with Legacy Design Build Remodeling in [Scottsdale](#), who recommends it to serious cooks. "If there's ever a concern with germs or cleaning up, quartz is what I usually recommend. It's very user-friendly and easy to clean."

Engineered-stone countertops are made from 93 percent ground quartz set in resin and polished to shine. Popular brands include CaesarStone, Zodiaq, Cambria and Silestone.

Steve Shinn, who owns Homework Remodels in Phoenix and worked on Hobza's kitchen, prefers quartz. He said many of his clients with historical homes in central Phoenix choose either quartz or concrete countertops.

"I think with all types of (trends), people get a little tired of things," Shinn said. "There's a certain amount of passe coming on the granite."

Still, he said, price is a big factor for [homeowners](#) right now, which will keep granite popular. Quartz typically is more expensive than some granite. Inexpensive granite sells for less than \$40 per square foot, while engineered-quartz countertops typically start at about \$50.

"Overall, there's still more granite being used than anything else," Shinn said. "It got so popular that the price came down." However, he added, "I've found that the price on quartz has been getting more competitive all the time."

Several other countertop materials - from recycled products (PaperStone, from paper, and IceStone, from glass) to stainless steel and concrete - are gaining popularity. But higher price tags still keep them rare.

Deborah Miller, designer at Affinity Kitchens Design Group in Scottsdale, helps her clients choose countertop colors and options, but she doesn't sell countertops. She said many clients come to her with all types of countertop materials in mind, thinking they'll save money and get something unique.

They're often surprised to learn that quartz, stainless steel and concrete are more expensive. Stainless-steel and concrete counters can cost more than \$100 per square foot.

"Granite is still the best deal out there," Miller said. "People come in talking about (another material), but when they understand that it costs more, they usually jump back down to the granite."

One countertop trend she has noticed is homeowners using more exotic wood, such as teak, on part of the [kitchen countertops](#) or on an island. The touch of wood warms up the rooms, which often are open to living and dining areas.

"Kitchens have to look more like furniture and feel more like part of the whole design of the house," she said.

Miller said another trend is customers varying the thickness of the countertop edge to create a unique look.

Soapstone, another non-porous natural stone, also is enjoying popularity. But it, too, can be expensive, Dumka said, ranging from \$40 to \$300 per square foot.

"This almost looks like a concrete," Dumka said of the matte stone, which can be oiled to look darker. "It has a little more of an informal look as opposed to a polished-stone countertop."

Dumka also has used glass countertops in contemporary-kitchen remodels and onyx in high-end countertop designs.

"Glass is a great way to give a real modern edge to your kitchen," he said. "We have used it in a few of our kitchens over the last couple of years, but it's not typical."

Glass, which costs about \$100 to \$200 per square foot, can be harder to maintain because it can scratch and chip easily, Dumka said.

As for onyx, the semiprecious translucent stone can be lighted underneath for a dramatic effect. It's also expensive, starting at about \$90 per square foot.

"Onyx countertops are really kind of rare," Dumka said. "It's going to be a high-end powder room kind of a counter."

One countertop choice that seems to be losing ground with customers is laminate. By far the cheapest option, laminate countertops come in a huge array of colors and start at less than \$20 per square foot.

Solid-surface acrylic countertops, such as Corian, also have lost popularity. Solid surfaces start at about \$40 per square foot, or about the same as the least expensive granite.

"Before granite became more affordable, the Corian was a good upgrade if you were upgrading from laminate," Dumka said.

Meanwhile, home builders say granite continues to be a favorite countertop surface for home buyers. But they're also starting to branch out into some recycled and engineered-stone surfaces.

Jacque Petroulakis, spokeswoman for Pulte Homes, said the company is using CaesarStone in a couple of Del Webb active-adult communities in the Valley. She said it has been used at Sun City Festival in Buckeye and Sun City Anthem at Merrill Ranch in Florence.

"It's been very popular," she said. "Quite frankly, the maintenance is so carefree compared to a natural stone."

However, "The majority of our communities still offer granite," Petroulakis said, "because while the engineered stone is very popular, our consumer still likes the granite."

Toll Brothers is experimenting with eco-friendly materials in some of the luxury homes it builds.

Linda Rossi, marketing director for the builder's Southwest division, said Toll Brothers' Montevista homes in Phoenix offer optional Teragren bamboo butcher blocks for kitchen islands and countertops made from compressed paper.

Toll Brothers also offers quartz countertops as an option in its design center. But Rossi said granite is by far the most popular choice for their homebuyers, with [marble countertops](#) coming in second.

"There's no question - granite trumps everything in the kitchens," Rossi said.

More eco-friendly countertops also are making inroads. IceStone, a product that uses recycled glass and cement, and PaperStone, which blends recycled paper in resin, are gaining a following from fans of green materials. EcoTop, made from a recycled wood and resin, and Alkemi, a countertop material that uses recycled aluminum in resin, are other green-branded products to watch.

Shinn said he likes these types of materials, but most cost as much or more than quartz, which also is considered an eco-friendly material, or granite.

"Right now, people tend to be really price-conscious," Shinn said.