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Counter Offers

Need a hip, attractive, durable counter? Try to top these.

By: Nigel F. Maynard

If you're looking for a cool countertop surfacing material, there is good news and bad news. First the good: In recent years, the category has seen a steady increase in new and exciting materials as well as an equal amount of re-engineered oldies but goodies. The bad news, however, is that the breadth of options can leave even the most informed scratching their collective heads.



It wasn't so 40 years ago, when options were limited to laminate, butcher block, various types of stone, and maybe ceramic tile. Laminate had a stranglehold on the category and was seemingly the only game in town, but then Wilmington, Del.-based DuPont came along with Corian solid surfacing and changed the game. With its low-maintenance qualities, its ability to assume different shapes, and the fact that it can be fabricated with nearly invisible seams, Corian became a consumer darling.

Today, of course, Corian and the aforementioned materials are but a drop in the bucket for a product category in which there are layers of subcategories. Take concrete, for example. What was once seen as a frivolous choice when it first appeared on the scene has become a viable option. You can now specify regular concrete countertops or you can get really specific and ask for lightweight concrete (Syndecrete, among others), or a combination of concrete with recycled glass (Ice Stone, among many), with recycled paper and recycled glass (Squak Mountain Stone), or recycled porcelain (EnviroMODE), and on and on.

And new materials keep coming. One area of growth is in so-called sustainable countertops—those made with post-consumer recycled content such as paper, glass, or stainless steel, or offerings made from salvage material or from rapidly renewable sources such as bamboo.

Bainbridge Island, Wash.-based Teragren, which offers a stable of bamboo products, has expanded to include three new countertops—strand bamboo, end-grain strand bamboo, and traditional bamboo.

"Teragren is committed to developing innovative new bamboo products that meet the ever-growing demand for sustainable materials," Ann Knight, executive vice president and global brand director, says in a statement announcing the line. "As consumers continue looking for eco-friendly products to complement the kitchen, bath—and the entire home—we're thrilled to offer these new, beautiful, and sustainable bamboo countertops that are perfect for residential and commercial settings."

Quartz, which was first used in Europe 20 years ago and exploded on the U.S. scene in the last 15, continues to grow in popularity. Made from at least 93 percent natural quartz, resins, and colorants, the product is touted as granite's more versatile and low-maintenance cousin. Manufacturers are making the product with recycled content, too.

Cosentino North America in Stafford, Texas, recently launched ECO by Cosentino, a line of surfacing made from 75 percent recycled material. It caters to environmentally conscious and design-oriented architects, builders, and consumers, the company says. Roberto Contreras Jr., president of Cosentino North America, says the product "marks the introduction of an entirely new category to the industry and sets a new standard that not only complies with environmental regulations but goes beyond and invests in innovative environmental and conservation practices and technologies."

DuPont, as well, is no longer content to offer the standard fare. The company has grown its color palette and continues to expand its product line. At this year's Kitchen/Bath Industry Show, the manufacturer added the Arctic Series to its line of translucent solid surfacing. Maureen McGeehan, marketing manager for DuPont Surfaces, says the Arctic Series is perhaps the company's coolest to date. "The sleek contemporary colors are embellished with a wintry mix of white, which combined with its tinted backdrop color will diffuse light and recharge any environment," she adds.

What's cool about Arctic is that it permits more light to pass through the material than other Corian colors, which allows designers to create spaces with a ghostly vibe when the countertop is lit from below.

So, with all the options, how is a builder or designer to choose? "I like to think of each situation as unique [so] we choose surfacing materials that are appropriate to the particular project," says architect Kevin Alter, principal of Alterstudio in Austin, Texas. Alter prefers products "that will seam well so we can make a slab seem more substantial ... or especially long," he says.

Among Alter's favorites are cast stone, quartz, homogeneous stones such as black granite or soapstone, stainless steel, and white marble—even though many designers often discourage homeowners from using the product in the kitchen.

Says Alter, "It's so very elegant and timeless, and while I know folks worry about it staining, I think it is worth the risk—it has been traditional counter material for hundreds of years, and often looks better a bit worn in."

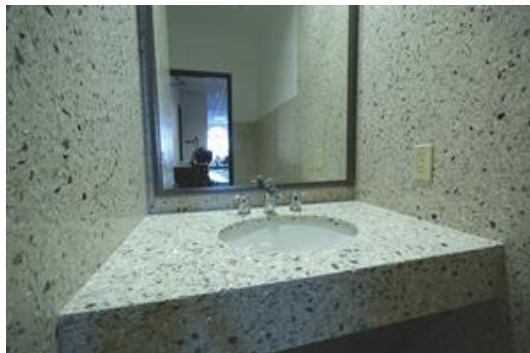
Strand Street: The manufacturer has added three new renewable bamboo countertops to its collection of products: strand, end-grain strand, and traditional. Made with non-urea adhesive, the strand countertop products are 154 percent harder than red oak and each top is bacteria-resistant and formaldehyde-free. Various sizes are available from 36 inches wide, 72 inches long, and 1 1/2 inches thick. Teragren. 800-929-6333. www.teragren.com.





Surface Tension: ECO by Cosentino is a new surfacing made from 75 percent recycled material, including salvaged mirrors and window glass, recycled consumer glass, porcelain, and industrial furnace ash. The recycled content is mixed with 25 percent stone scrap and bonded with a resin made in part from corn oil and resin. It's available in slabs measuring 63 inches by 128 inches and 12-, 18-, and 24-inch-square tiles. Cosentino North America. 800-291-1311. www.ecobycosentino.com.

Squak Box: A relatively new product, Squak Mountain Stone is made from low-carbon cement, and post-consumer and post-industrial recycled paper and recycled glass. The resulting product has the industrial look of concrete or the rustic appearance of limestone or slate. Slabs come in five colors and measure 56 inches wide, 96 inches long, and 1 3/8 inches thick. Tiger Mountain Innovations. 206-234-4791. www.squakmountainstone.com.



Ceramic Glaze: The manufacturer takes pre-consumer toilets, tubs, and sinks from Kohler and turns them into a new line of countertop product called EnviroMODE. Using the craft of terrazzo, the company combines epoxy resin or cementitious binder with the crushed porcelain chips to create a top that is free of volatile organic compounds. It is also heat and scratch resistant. EnviroGLAS. 888-523-7894. www.enviroglasproducts.com.

Arctic Blast: The Arctic Series is not the manufacturer's typical Corian product. Calling it "the next evolution of surface translucency," the company has created five new offerings that are a combination of white and a tinted backdrop color that emits a ghostly glow when lit from underneath. Available in a 1/2-inch thickness, the product can be thermoformed, bent, and textured. DuPont. 800-426-7426. www.countertops.dupont.com.

