

DESIGNER FYI: All stones are not alike

By Kris Linder

The most often used counter top materials today are granite and marble. Both are natural materials available in a huge range of colors and patterns. But that's where the similarities end.

Granite is prized for its durability — it's almost impossible to scratch or chip, it's heat- and waterproof and difficult to stain. Marble, on the other hand, is a derivative of limestone and is relatively soft, and is more easily scratched or stained. As a designer, I think the look of marble just can't be beat. So which is best? Well, both are, but they have their needs.

Granite is the ideal stone to use in flooring and counter tops, and as deco pieces in wood flooring and backsplashes. While marble also can be used for counter tops, care must be taken to wipe up any spills. Even water will etch marble over time.

If you just can't depart from the look of marble for the work spaces in your kitchen, we suggest marble that has been honed. With honed marble, the surface polish has been removed, lending it a very natural and rustic beauty which will patina over time. Because you will be looking at these counter tops every day, think of it as horizontal art — make sure you love it. Both marble and granite, honed or not, needs to be well sealed once a year to keep up their inherent properties.

A departure from granite and marble surfaces — with very interesting results — are slate and stainless steel.

Slate, rustic and earthy in nature, has many uses — backsplashes, flooring and trim are just a few of them. Mixing slate with granite or limestone can result in a very unique look. Many slates are too porous for use in the kitchen, but several new types have a high silica content that reduces the porosity. Some advantages of slate are that the surface is smooth and cool and relatively hard wearing. The main disadvantage is the porous nature of slate means oils and stains absorb more easily; sealer must be more frequently applied.

Stainless steel is a near-perfect worktop material. It is heatproof, hygienic and non-corrosive. It's appearance will lend a more commercial look to your kitchen, which is becoming popular with home chefs. A brushed finish is preferable, though the original polished version — while more labor intensive in its maintenance — can be stunning.

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