

## Diamonds Are Forever. These Counters May Be Too.; [FINAL Edition]

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**Full Text** (1205 words)

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Kitchen counters are expected to take a lot of abuse and still look great. Most fall short of the mark. Some are easily scratched, others easily stained, and the most rugged ones look, well, rugged.

The ideal combination of beauty and indestructibility would be a countertop-size sheet of diamond -- hard enough to withstand scratches, with plenty of sparkle and shine.

That, of course, does not exist. But by going three notches down the Mohs hardness scale, we reach quartz -- a material as abundant as diamonds are rare. And a recently introduced quartz material is making a lot of kitchen counters look terrific while standing up to whatever the cook dishes out.

"The last time I saw a new product generate this much excitement was when Corian was introduced" more than 30 years ago, says John Murray, the owner of Counter Intelligence in Silver Spring, which fabricates and installs custom counters.

The product, a type of engineered stone sold under several names, is made with a relatively new manufacturing process that combines particles of quartz with silica sand, pigment and binders to produce a material with the look and feel of granite but with resistance to stains, scratches and impacts that surpasses natural stone. And the color options include some never found in nature.

How do they do that?

The raw materials undergo a "vacuum vibro-compression" process, which does to the small pieces what shaking does to the contents of a cereal box, only more so. Then binders, mostly polyester resins, fuse under pressure to hold the densely compacted particles tightly in place.

When nature forms granite, the binding agent is the rock itself -- melted, then cooled over eons. The resin-based alternative takes only hours to form, but the resulting material is amazingly like natural stone.

When Eileen Fitzgerald began a small-scale kitchen renovation in Rockville, she chose a Silestone quartz countertop from Home Depot's Expo Design Center in Fairfax. "We looked at [solid surface], but it looked too much like plastic. And granite had a limited range of colors. But the quartz was beautiful. We chose a blue and tan mix. It looks like real stone, but it's more durable. The new counter makes it look as if we renovated the entire room."

This engineered stone goes by many names: Breton, the Italian manufacturer that developed the process and sells the machines that produce it, calls it Bretonstone ([www.breton-st.it.com](http://www.breton-st.it.com)). In this country, Bretonstone Quartz is available as Silestone (rhymes with tile stone) from the U.S. branch of a Spanish firm, Cosentino ([www.silestoneusa.com](http://www.silestoneusa.com)); as Zodiaq, Dupont's entry into the market ([www.dupont.com/zodiaq](http://www.dupont.com/zodiaq)); and as CaesarStone, an Israeli product ([www.caesarstoneus.com](http://www.caesarstoneus.com)). Each manufacturer offers a different selection of colors and aggregate combinations.

The product has been sold in Europe under various names for nearly a decade. Only in the past year or two has it arrived in most major U.S. markets, showing up in the National Home Builders Association New American Home last year in Texas. And once consumers saw it, it began to fly off the shelves.

Carl Holman is the countertop specialist at Expo Design Center (703-691-2433), which sells Silestone, with the counters fabricated by Counter Intelligence (301-589-5321; [www.countintel.com](http://www.countintel.com)). He says the store has carried the product for nearly two years, and it's responsible for almost a third of counter sales, with granite and solid-surface materials like Corian splitting the other two-thirds.

The costs are roughly the same, says Holman. "Solid surface runs between \$44 and \$69 a square foot," he says. "Silestone is between \$53 and \$64, and granite runs from \$54 to \$77."

Zodiaq, Dupont's quartz material, costs a bit more, as much as \$80 a square foot. Gary Wood, of Carapace , a Corian fabricator in Savage that also installs the new quartz counters, says that's because Dupont trains and certifies its installers and uses better raw materials (301-256-3100; [www.carapacecorp.com](http://www.carapacecorp.com)). "The company owns its own manufacturing plant in Quebec," he says, so it can ensure consistent quality.

Even though any of the three higher-end options run two to three times the cost of a basic laminate counter, people seem willing to pay extra for a surface that looks great, especially if it's low- maintenance. And that's where quartz shines.

Because quartz is surpassed on the Mohs hardness scale only by diamond, topaz and sapphire (corundum), it's almost impossible to scratch a quartz counter. "If you take a key and scrape it over this surface, a layer of metal comes off [the key]," says Murray, of Counter Intelligence.

"You just wipe that away, and it looks perfect again. You have to use diamond tools to work it."

In fact, when Cosentino introduced Silestone at last year's Kitchen & Bath Industries Show in Chicago, it had flamenco and tap dancers stomping out rhythms on the quartz surface -- which was utterly unaffected. Silestone also sells quartz floor tile to complement the countertop line.

Engineered quartz stands up to stains as well. Betty Meier installed granite counters in her Vienna kitchen a few years ago. When it was time to update her master bath, she originally thought she'd put granite there as well. "But I know that granite can stain," she says, "and I worried about stains from makeup and nail polish."

Meier and her daughter, Vicki Oberleitner, an architecture student and project manager for Warner Construction Consultants in Rockville, spotted Silestone at Expo. It was the non-porous quality of the engineered stone that attracted them. "It doesn't have to be sealed, like granite does. And it came in a light color, called Capri Limestone," says Meier. "We'll be doing the downstairs bath soon, and I'll probably use it again."

Designers get excited about the color options in quartz. When Beverly Alig, a certified kitchen designer at Kitchen Encounters in Annapolis (410-263-4900), designed a kitchen renovation with a large island last summer, she had never used a quartz product. But her client, a Dupont employee, suggested she look into Zodiaq.

"The cabinets were light wood, and the counters were a dark, greenish black laminate," she says. "The island top has both those colors, and pulls the whole kitchen together." It was among the first Zodiaq projects for Carapace and Don Carr, of Heartwood Solid Surfaces in Manassas (703-690-0053), but Alig says it couldn't have gone more smoothly.

Smoothness -- the tactile variety -- is sometimes an issue with granite counters. Unlike the invisible seams in solid-surface material, granite has rough seams that are noticeable, especially when the grain changes direction slightly from one piece to the next. But engineered quartz stone has no directional grain, and the material is finer, so the seams are less obtrusive, especially in the darker colors.

Because the quartz material is more dense than granite, it's less likely to chip or break. That means that cutouts for sinks and cooktops can be a little closer to the edge with greater precision than natural stone would allow; cracks at the corners of a cutout, a fairly common problem with granite, just don't happen with quartz, installers say.

Fitzgerald agrees. "I've done other remodeling, and I'm always a little bit disappointed -- it was never exactly what I wanted," she says. "But this counter exceeded my expectations. I just love it."

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