

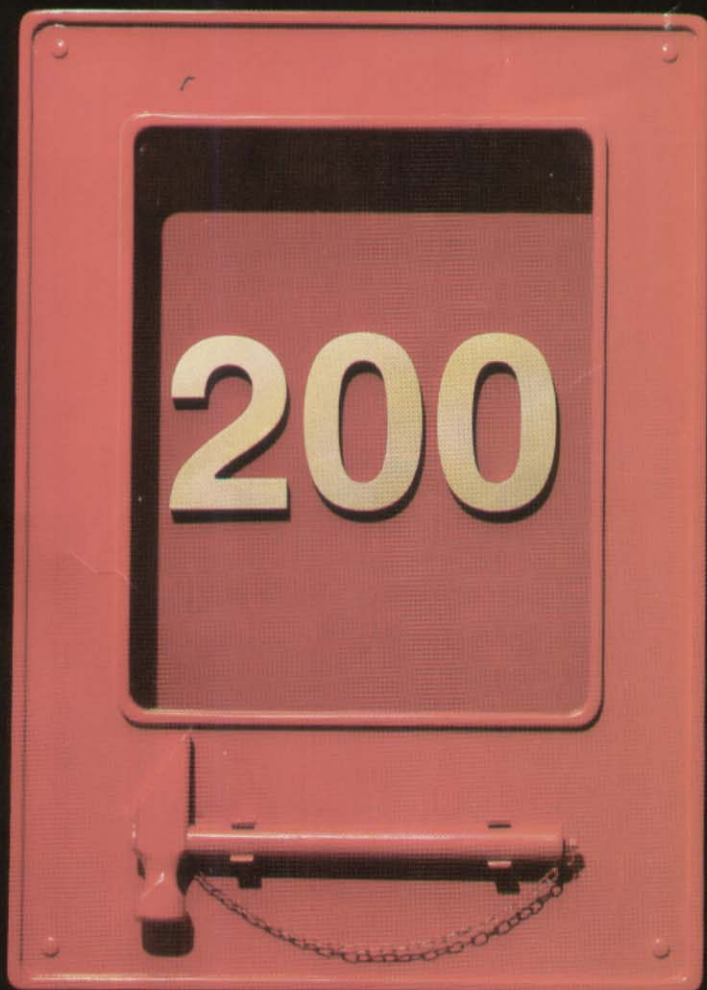
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Counter revolution

Forget granite. Wood, soapstone and glass countertops are the next big things in kitchens
by Julie Cazzin

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HERE WAS A TIME WHEN

it was easy for self-respecting fashionistas to choose the material for their kitchen countertops. It was granite, end of story. But these days granite is starting to look a bit been-there-done-that. "The problem with granite is that people don't tend to stray from certain colors and polished finishes" says Lori Parker, owner of Lori Parker Design Studio in Kaleden, B.C. "You see the same countertop patterns everywhere. The trend feels overdone."

Homeowners in search of the next big kitchen thing are turning to exotic

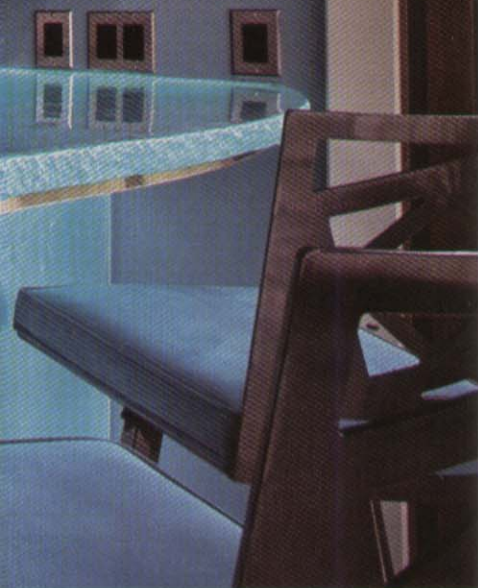
woods, soapstone, even glass. Call it a counter revolution. Fans of these new surfaces say they offer just as much visual impact as granite, but with many utilitarian advantages.

Kaethe Funk, a homemaker in Jordan, Ont., briefly considered granite when she renovated the kitchen in her 1980s-style two-storey house few months ago. But she wound up choosing soapstone instead—a black Brazilian soapstone with subtle grey veining that looks and feels a lot warmer than granite. One of its big pluses is that, unlike granite, it's not porous, so it never stains. "I'd seen granite everywhere and I hate the way it stains," says Funk. "I wanted something different. With soapstone, I just oil it with mineral oil and it looks great."

Soapstone comes in many varieties

and it pays to know the differences. Roy Wielhouwer, owner of Green Mountain Fabricators of Soapstone in St. Catharines, Ont., reassures buyers that he only uses soapstone from Brazil—a much harder variety than the relatively soft kind mined in Quebec, which is used in Inuit art. He says Brazilian soapstone is heat-proof (you can put a hot pot on it directly from the stove) and also easy on the ears (there's no sharp, tinkling noise every time you put dishes, cups and glasses on it, as there is with granite tops). "Granite is about perfection and looking great all the time," says Wielhouwer, "but it's so easy to see the stains on it right away. That can be frustrating. Brazilian soapstone is a more casual look and has its own charm." Indian and Finnish varieties are also available, but

Glass countertops (left) are durable, easy to clean, and add a unique beauty to the kitchen. Brazilian soapstone (right) is both heat-proof and stain-resistant



aren't quite as durable as the Brazilian. Expect to pay \$125 a square-foot for top-end Brazilian stone, which is slightly more than you would pay for granite.

If stone countertops leave you cold, check out exotic woods. Christian Anton, a sales rep with Lafor Wood Products of New Westminster, B.C., says more and more people are installing tops made of Central American or African woods such as jatoba or zebrawood. The tops can be made as thick as a man's arm and their rich grains charm the eye with striking patterns. "The aesthetics are exquisite," says Anton. "These exotic woods have patterns just not found in hardwoods grown in northern latitudes."

Pat Roach of Whitehorse says he loved exotic wooden tops the minute he set eyes on them on Lafor's website. He and his wife, Jennifer, wound up choosing a custom-made countertop in black locust. "It's striking," says Roach, a research scientist with the federal govern-

ment. "Even our carpenter did a double-take when he first saw it."

Roach, an avid cook, says his new top does require some new habits. He must use a hot pad when he's putting down a hot pot to avoid burning the surface. Also, he can't chop on the black locust top like he would on a standard butcher block—the wood is so hard it would dull his knives. "We have a maple wood block that we do most of our vegetable chopping on because we want the knives to stay sharp," says Roach. "But even if we cut or chop on the locust top occasionally, there's never any fear of scratching it. It's one of the hardest woods in the world." To maintain his new counter, Roach has to rub it with mineral oil once a month. If you want a similar top for your own kitchen, expect to pay \$70 to \$100 a linear foot depending on the wood.

And what if you want something truly different? When Michele Upvall and her husband Richard Ptachinski of Pittsburgh decided to update the kitchen countertop in their 1,700-sq.-ft. condominium, they wanted something that would be both creative and contemporary. "We were willing to take a risk with something totally different," says Upvall, a university professor. "We just didn't want what everybody else in our community had—no matter how nice they thought it looked."

Within days of beginning their In-

ternet search, the couple stumbled across ThinkGlass of Montreal. Founded eight years ago by artists Bertrand Charest and Michel Mailhout, ThinkGlass specializes in custom-designed glass countertops. While Upvall loved the look, she had some questions. "I asked myself, 'What if I drop something on it? Will it shatter into a thousand pieces?'"

But seeing some sample countertops allayed her fears. The tops were thick as a plank, capable of taking a hammer blow, and able to handle temperatures up to 700°F without burning. Their clear surfaces and textured undersides helped hide small scratches and fingerprints. Upvall was convinced.

She's been delighted with her purchase. Aside from the occasional wipe with glass cleaner, she doesn't have to do a speck of maintenance. The only downside? At \$300 a linear foot, her new glass countertop is triple the cost of granite.

Upvall doesn't regret the cost one bit. The glass top not only makes her condo's small kitchen look bigger, but brighter, too. And it has an added bonus—at night when she walks into the kitchen and flips on the blue-green tapelights along the counter's back edge, the glass counter looks like clear blue water flowing down a river. "On those evenings, it feels like we've been able to bring a little of the outside in," says Upvall. "Nothing beats it." ■