

Natural or manmade, our kitchen benches make a style statement but also often take a daily beating. Here, kitchen designer **Emma Morris** leads us through the maze of benchtop materials to help us make an educated decision based on the qualities and characteristics of each different type



bench basics

No other surface takes as much of a beating as the kitchen benchtop. From appearance and design to budget and durability, there is a lot to think about when choosing that perfect work surface, so where do you start? Each benchtop material has its own unique qualities and characteristics, so it is important to investigate each one and make an educated decision.

Laminate

Laminate benchtops are definitely the winner when it comes to price, which is one reason why they are the most popular type of benchtop used. There is an appealing range of styles, colours and patterns available, and they can even emulate other materials, such as natural stone or timber. If you choose a high-pressure laminate for your benchtop, it will be easier to clean and withstand scratching

and staining a lot better. While laminate does have its advantages, there are some things that you need to consider. It is not as durable as some other materials, like stones or composites, so it will only stay in tip-top condition for around 10 years. Laminate is vulnerable to cuts and stains (beware curry sauce and food colouring). It is also not heat-resistant, which means you can't place hot pans directly on the surface, nor prepare food directly on to it. You also need to be aware that abrasive cleaners cannot be used on your laminate benchtop.

Stainless steel

Stainless steel is a very popular, sleek and stylish choice. This style of benchtop is commonly used to enhance the minimal and industrial style kitchen because of its seamless finish and ability to include integrated sinks. Stainless steel is non-

porous, extremely hygienic and can withstand the direct heat of pots and pans. While minor scratches can be buffed out, your stainless steel benchtop will acquire scratches with age.

Granite

Granite benchtops come in a variety of colours and textures and, because it's a natural material, no two benchtops are ever exactly the same. It is one of the hardest materials on earth, composed primarily of quartz, feldspar and mica. While it is resistant to scratches, acids, stains and heat, and is very durable, it is not recommended to chop directly on to it as it will scratch. Granite can have a honed finish (matt appearance) or can be polished to a high shine. Granite is generally tougher and more stain-resistant than marble and will last a lifetime or more, if properly maintained.



Formica 180fx Laminate in Carrera Marble

Marble

Marble is a beautiful stone and one of my personal favourites. It is softer than granite and can scratch more easily. It is also sensitive to acidic foods such as vinegar, lemon, tomatoes, wine, some cleaners, mildew removers and other materials commonly found in the kitchen. The Italians have been using marble benchtops for hundreds, if not thousands of years, however, and the imperfections simply add to the character and style of the kitchen, creating a rustic edge. Marble will create a sense of movement and interest in a more minimal kitchen design.



Hot off the press

With six new unique colours recently added to the Caesarstone colour range, our favourites are the Shitake (left) and Crème Brulee (right), with their timeless tones, you can't go past them.

The beautiful neutral organic mushroom colour of the Shitake creates a look and feel of classic limestone.

Crème Brulee is a new timeless classic, with a soft interplay of creams.

Timber

This natural product will bring warmth and a lived-in feeling to your kitchen. It is environmentally friendly and will age well; however, make sure you select FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) timber. An oil sealant will give your timber benchtop a natural finish and the bench can be repaired by sanding and re-oiling. Polyurethane is

another option for sealing timber. If you decide to get a timber benchtop, be aware that it will require more maintenance than the other surfaces as it is softer and more prone to water damage. A practical application of timber is to use it on the kitchen island, where it can be treated as a butcher's block.

clear results

Lustre Clearstone Coating is a wonderful and exciting new product. This polyester-based resin system is clear, non-yellowing, and can be applied to many types of natural stone, such as marble, limestone and sandstone, creating a barrier of outstanding stain and chemical resistance. So if you love the natural materials, but were apprehensive about preventing damage, this is the product for you.



Kitchen designed by Emma Morris



Laminex Diamond Gloss Laminate

Engineered stone

Engineered stone is made of quartz or granite granules, marble dust or glass chips mixed with a resin or polyester base. It includes the brand names CaesarStone and SmartStone. It's a relatively new product, but its appearance and durability have made it one of the most popular kitchen benchtop choices. There is a wonderful range of colours available with CaesarStone and it is a very practical and durable option. It can be specified as a very thin 20mm-30mm thick solid top or manufactured to up to 200mm thick – this is simply dependent on the look you are trying to achieve.



Corian in Lava Rock

Solid surface

Solid surface man-made acrylic benchtops, such as Corian or HI-MACS, are the most expensive of all, but are the choice of many homeowners because of their extreme durability and the fact that they can be manufactured with integrated sinks and drainers. Its main advantage is that it can be moulded seamlessly and without join lines. Solid surface colours do not have the same depth as manufactured quartz or natural stone benchtops but, unlike other benchtop materials, can be scoured with abrasive cleansers. This actually helps buff out small surface scratches and stains that occur with use. The main disadvantage is that it does not withstand heat at all. It may mark or burn if extremely hot items are placed on it, so care must be used to avoid heat.



Caesarstone in Raven

Concrete

People like concrete because it is very moldable. You can shape it into anything and the masters of concrete make the process of crafting a concrete benchtop look really easy. Compared to other materials, concrete can be very cost effective and you can even make it yourself; the majority of the costs will go into the labor of forming and pouring the concrete. Concrete fits with many different styles of homes, from contemporary to rustic and ranch style. If you would like to personalise your concrete benchtop, it can be acid-stained. Polishing, embedding objects such as glass chips and special edges are other ways of personalising this material. ■