

A New Choice in Countertops Made Mostly of Paper

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Plastic . . . or paper?

A choice associated with supermarket checkout lines now applies to kitchen countertops too. A new countertop contender called Richlite, made of paper and wood pulp, is durable, bacteria resistant and has color all the way through. Costwise, the material falls between high-end granites and solid-surface materials and less expensive plastic laminates.

Its advantages were intriguing to Jenna Giannini. She and her husband, Frank, spent a year researching products for the kitchen they're remodeling in their Logan Circle condominium. The products they picked came from all over the world, and the paper-based Richlite was about the only American-made item they chose.

"We considered other options," said Jenna Giannini. "First we looked at granite, which we liked, but everybody uses it and it's expensive. Then we considered stainless steel, which also is very expensive for the custom installation we wanted. Then there was concrete, but we worried about the weight and the maintenance. And any of them would have doubled our countertop budget. So we went with the Richlite. It was less expensive, it measured up to granite, in our opinion, and it was easier for the contractor to work with."

But a countertop made of paper? In fact, 65 percent of the material is paper, up to 10 percent of which is recycled. The rest is wood pulp from managed forests -- the stuff that in your yard would go into the chipper -- ground up and turned to pulp. All this is held together by a resin and baked, so the volatile chemicals burn off and leave a dense solid product with consistent coloring throughout.

The manufacturer, Rainier Richlite Co. of Tacoma, Wash., began selling the material in this area last spring (www.richlite.com). The company representative, kitchen designer Chris Donaghy of Kitchen Brokers in Mason Neck, Va., has had three local homeowners -- including the Gianninis -- specify it for their kitchens.

These product pioneers aren't taking as big a risk as one might think. Laminated cardboard has been used for decades in commercial kitchens. It's one of three surfaces -- the other two are stainless steel and Corian-type solid-surface material -- that are certified by the Ann Arbor, Mich.-based National Sanitary Foundation International as being safe for food preparation. According to Don Atkinson, Richlite's marketing manager, "Our material doesn't harbor the colonization of bacteria."

The material originally was designed for industrial use. Because it's quite dense yet easy to machine, Boeing used it to make prototype airplane parts. But cardboard seems ready for takeoff in the kitchen design field because it works as well and looks as good as many solid surfaces, and costs a little more than half as much.

Colors are camel (a basic brown), nutmeg (yellowish) and slate black. A pistachio color (light green) was formulated for use in Starbucks. It is sold in thicknesses from one-quarter inch to three inches.

David Decker of Decker Construction in Annapolis, installed the product in Tom Levine's Annapolis kitchen last week. His client, says Decker, "got estimates on granite and Corian. Those came back at between \$7,000 and \$8,000 for the material. The Richlite was \$3,800 for the two-inch-thick slate black." That works out to a bit more than half the cost of the other materials.

So how does the paper countertop stack up in term of installation? "It's extremely easy to work with," says Decker, who has installed most countertop materials. And a product that's easy to work with saves the homeowner money on installation costs.

"But it's heavy -- about the same as granite and heavier than Corian, which comes in three-quarter-inch thickness and uses an edge to make it look thicker. The big two-inch-thick piece weighed almost 1,000 pounds. But this material can overhang two feet without support," Decker says.

"The big surprise was that we could almost create the counter on-site. With just a circular saw and a new carbide blade, I cut the arched curve out of the counter right in the kitchen. It cut smooth, no splinters. And the seams were barely noticeable. We joined the pieces with biscuits and an adhesive of epoxy plus sawdust from the Richlite, for color."

Because it's mostly paper, the obvious questions might be, "Does it burn? Does it stain? Is it susceptible to scratches?"

According to Atkinson, installing the material next to the stove is not a problem; it's heat-rated to 350 degrees F. "Putting a pot of boiling water on it wouldn't hurt it," Atkinson says, "but a pan of hot oil might leave a scorch mark." And that could be sanded away, but it would take a while -- months, perhaps -- for the color to even out again after sanding. The material does resist scratches -- in fact, it's often used as a cutting board. But it will scratch if the knife is sharp, so cutting directly on the countertop is discouraged.

And high-alkaline material such as grout (or papaya or red beets) will stain if left for a prolonged time. But those stains can be treated with vinegar and sanded.

There's also an availability downside. Because the distribution network is still being built, it can take as long as six weeks for the product to arrive from the West Coast. And there aren't a lot of contractors in this area with hands-on experience.

But there's one more virtue: When its countertop life is over, the paper countertop can be refurbished and reused -- turned into cutting boards or display shelves or some other home project. Or it can be left in pieces at the curb with other wood waste for recycling. Like paper.

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