

ARE YOU READY FOR MARBLE KITCHENS?

The speech. You know the one. You tell someone you want marble countertops in the kitchen and you'll hear it-probably more than once. People will tell you you'll never be able to drink red wine again. They'll tell you you'll need a degree in chemistry before you will be able to clean the counters for the first time. Bottom line, they'll tell you no. But you've seen marble kitchens in the magazines. You've been to Europe. You remember the white marble in the soda fountains of your youth. So what is everyone so afraid of?

The truth is, you *can* put marble on your countertops. It is after all, *your* kitchen. You could upholster the countertops with silk if you wanted to...it all boils down to how much maintenance you are willing to live with. So how much time and energy is involved? We've spoken to the Marble Institute of America (MIA), stone fabricators and homeowners to compile what it's like to live with marble. Here's what we found out.

Typically when a homeowner is looking for natural stone countertops the first stone they think of is granite. The reason for this is granite's reputation for durability and performance in the kitchen. According to the MIA, granites are undoubtedly the most popular stone type used in countertop applications today. These stones are some of the hardest, offering high levels of resistance to abrasion, scratching and heat. The primary minerals in the granite are resistant to virtually all chemicals commonly found in a residential setting.

Marbles on the other hand are made up primarily of calcite crystal. Due to their mineralogical makeup, all marbles are vulnerable to either abrasion or chemical attack. Scratching could occur from common kitchen utensils. Lemon juice, tomatoes, vinegar and any other acidic solutions would etch the surface, removing the polish on the stone. Although red wine is the most commonly feared liquid near a marble kitchen, foods that have both acidic and oily qualities are usually more harmful because the oil acts as a carrier into the stone. Salad dressings and marinades are common culprits.

The use of abrasive cleaners must be avoided for the same reason-no bleach or ammonia based products should be used. So how do you clean the counters? There are many marble friendly natural stone products on the market. If you have someone come in to clean your home, be sure that they are only using the products that you provide, not the strong chemical based commercial cleansers typically used. Because of the high absorption rate of most marbles, a sealer should be applied to help slow the rate of water and stain absorption into the stone. Depending on the life to the sealer, it will need to be reapplied periodically. Sealers are readily available on the market and can be easily applied by the homeowner. However, many homeowners have a misconception about stone sealers. Even though a stone is sealed, it does not mean that it is an impervious surface. The sealer can help slow the absorption process, but it does not mean that no staining will occur. Although

sealers have improved in recent years, there is not a product that will completely protect marble from staining or etching. It is simply a characteristic of the stone that this will occur.

The vulnerability of the polish on marble is one of the reasons marble is often honed when used in the kitchen. Removing the polish helps to camouflage the wearing of the stone and makes the surface have patinaed, or "aged" effect. It is difficult to see etches or rings on the stone when it is honed because the entire surface has already gone through an etching process in order to remove the polish. Jennifer Van Horn is a homeowner with honed Piel Serpentine marble in her kitchen. "I like the honed marble surface because the veins and pattern of the stone help to hide the surface dirt on the counter. I have polished concrete where my range is and it shows every little thing. On the marble, it's hard to tell what is part of the stone and what isn't." This camouflaging effect is one of the benefits of having a marble with veins. A white marble with little veining, for example, would be more likely to show wear, while a darker material with more movement would help to blur the line between stains and variations within the material.

So how do fabricators feel about installing marble in the kitchen? Mike Knox of Stonecutters Guild in Huntsville, Alabama, responds, "Here's what marble will do in your kitchen-it will ring, it will stain, but it will be beautiful. Most of my clientele has traveled the world and they see patinaed marble, they see that there is nothing more real than that. I love working with marble and if a client wants it, I'll do it. But I'll also tell them that they are not going to call me every week to clean up an orange ring or a glass ring. If the homeowner is not going to appreciate what marble does and how it looks as it ages, I won't do it in their kitchen." John Howard, a salesperson in the G&L Marble Atlanta showroom is in agreement. "In the last few years more and more homeowners are asking for marble or limestone for the kitchen. They see it in magazines, their designer tells them about it, and they want it. I always tell them about the staining and the scratching and if they still want it, then I say 'go for it'. However, there are people that want the marble to look brand new forever, and for those people I don't think marble is a good idea."

If a homeowner is hesitant to have marble in vulnerable areas of the kitchen, for example, around the range, then mixing materials is an option. Installing granite in the work areas and marble in the areas that receive less traffic is one way of having the best of both worlds. Kitchens today often combine more than one cabinetry style or finish, and the same is true of countertops.

In the end, the only person that can answer the question of whether marble is right for the kitchen is the individual homeowner. Homeowners need to ask themselves what their needs are and have the proper expectations of marble as a work surface. Every kitchen is used differently. Some kitchens are used more than others. Some kitchens are used by small children. Some kitchens are designed to look as if they have been there for many years and would benefit from an "aged" surface, while others may be served better by a countertop that looks the same as it did the day it was installed. Regardless, with more natural stones on the market than ever before, there truly is a natural stone out there for everyone. It is simply a matter of determining which is the right choice for you.